



XBOX



THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

MASS EFFECT 4

NEW INFO! RULE SPACE WITH AN IRON FIST

UNLOCK THE POWER OF XBOX ONE
HOW YOUR CONSOLE CAN REPLACE YOUR PC AND PHONE

GEARS OF WAR 4

THE COALITION UNLEASH THE TRUE POWER OF XBOX ONE

Future



MIRROR'S EDGE

INCREDIBLE NEW INFO + SCREENS



LEGO STAR WARS

LEGO EXPANDS THE UNIVERSE



FINAL FANTASY XV

HANDS-ON WITH THE EPIC JRPG



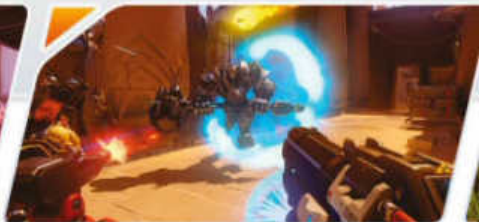
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PC | DVD



An active reload?

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Matthew Castle
Editor

What kind of manager locks up a staff writer for 31 days in the name of journalism? Er, if HR asks, not this one.

If you're joining us for the first time in a while, you'll notice that things have changed around here. We actually redesigned last issue, making this the sequel to the redesign. Being a games mag we know how sequels are meant to work. You go big (Tom is on stilts), you go loud (this intro is in a slightly larger font size than last month) and you start throwing cash around (we replaced Alex with Robert Downey Jr.). There's no way it won't be a smash hit. Thankfully, our cover star has more sense. Gears of War's new caretakers, The Coalition, are being careful to capture the flavour of Epic's action trilogy, while easing the formula forward in subtle ways. Okay, one of those subtle ways is a flying drill bit that'll chew from head to toe through a soft human body, but it wouldn't be Gears without those gore-induced gasps. Here's to many more to come.

OXM CONTRIBUTORS



Alex Dale
Deputy editor
Alex claimed to have bought a car this month on a *games journalist salary*. Sure, wanna explain these receipts for unicycle lessons, car-boy?



Tom Stone
Staff writer
Tom 'celebrated' his birthday in the office this year, thanks to the gift of deadlines. We've promised him it off next time. After all, you only turn 12 once.



Edwin Evans-Thirlwell
Contributor
Edwin covered *Gears 4* for us. When you think Gears, you think tough. You think dudebro. You think 'an English guy called Edwin'. Oorah!



Chris Schilling
Contributor
After writing a whole extra magazine for us last month, Chris earned his reward: getting to review a very average Xbox One game. Our pleasure!



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Everything you have to look forward to over the next 100 or so pages



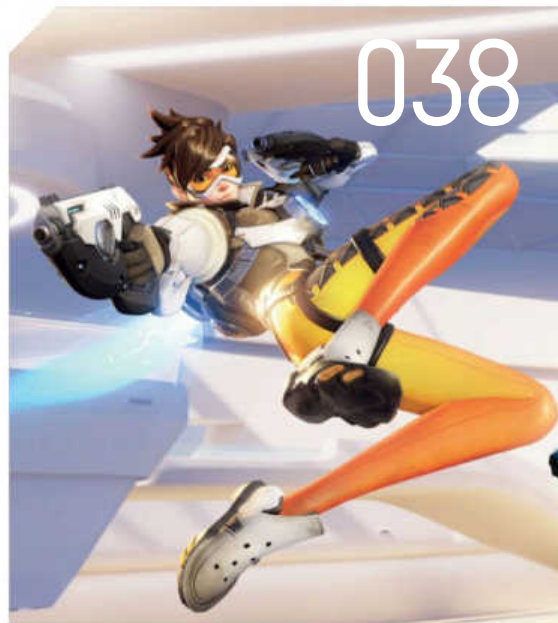
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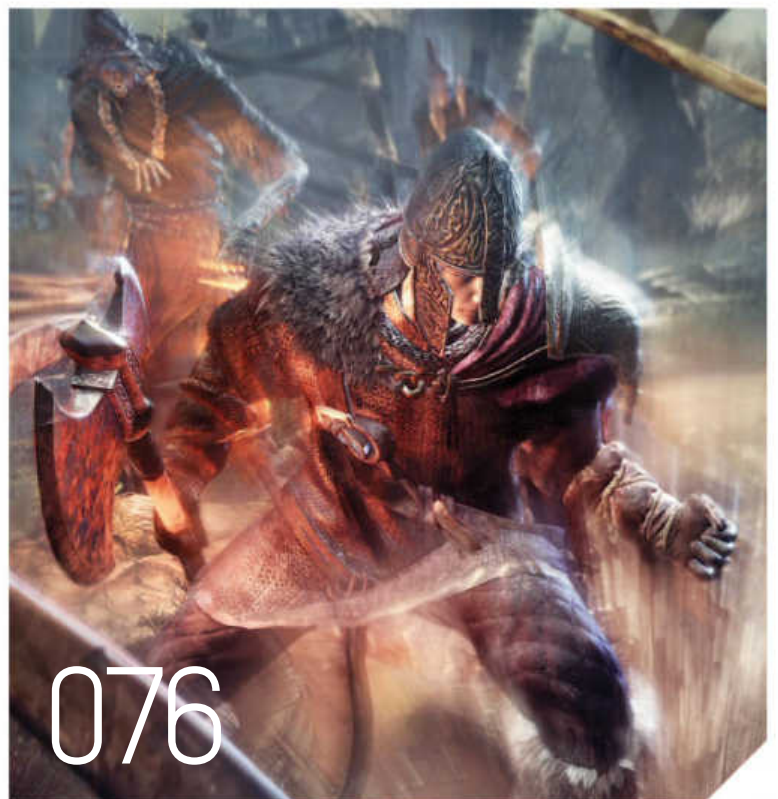
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→ HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY? WHY NOT WRITE TO TEAM OXM AT [OXM@FUTURENET.COM](mailto:oxm@futurenet.com)

insider



Big worlds, big ideas – that’s the theme of this month’s Insider section. Xbox One is approaching its prime years and with the training wheels off, devs are building ever-more ambitious open worlds. Arguably the highest reaching of the lot is **Mirror’s Edge Catalyst** (p8), which has EA DICE building a parkour theme park in the clouds. The tricky bit with this one is crafting a control system nimble enough to keep up with your character’s moves – especially given the first-person camera means you can’t see the boundaries of your own body. Meanwhile, if a map leaked online proves genuine, **Red Dead Redemption 2** (p18) will attempt to dazzle through sheer size. In the first in our regular series of roundtables, we pour over every inch of the alleged map and speculate on what it could mean for the most eagerly awaited open-world game not named GTA. Finally, we take a look at how **Halo 5: Guardians** (p22) is using the Xbox One’s horsepower to expand *ODST*’s beloved Firefight mode across the plains of Warzone’s big, beautiful, strategically rich maps.



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021





ABOVE So Faith's too moral for guns now. Good news to all who endured the original's forced shootouts.



ACT OF
FAITH

The great leap forward

Mirror's Edge Catalyst's design director explains how inspired design could make first person the new free-running view of choice



ABOVE Erik Odeldahl, design director on Catalyst, also worked on *Medal of Honor* and *Battlefield*.

First-person platforming used to be a bad design joke. Judging a tricky jump in a game where you couldn't see your legs? We were doomed to fall down every bottomless pit going. Hey, at least in Hell we would be able to meet the level designer who thought that was a good idea in person. But back in 2008, DICE's attempt to make blind jumping work stood out.

Set on the rooftops of an iPod-slick future city, *Mirror's Edge* just about proved that first-person parkour could stick the landing. You ran as Faith, a messenger whose arms and legs would flick into view as we sent her rolling, sliding and leaping away from goons who were determined to stop her overthrowing the totalitarian government (by jumping on it? Our plot memories are a little hazy). It was far from perfect, yet in a rooftop-hopping scene dominated by Assassin's Creed, *Mirror's Edge* proved that first-person parkour had potential.

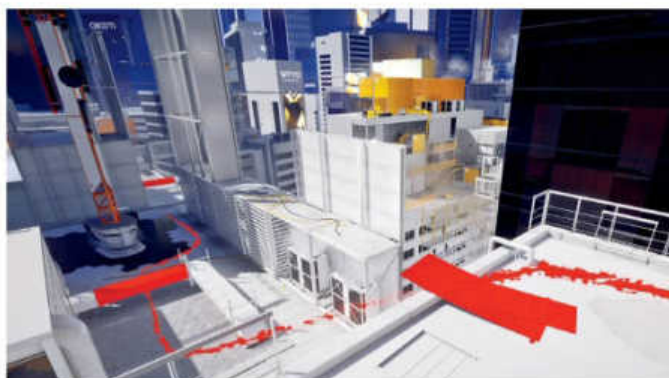
So the 2015 announcement of a dramatic reboot, *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*, had us jumping for joy. It's a perfect opportunity to train a wobbly original into a gold medal athlete. But eight years is a long time in games, and first-person parkour isn't as novel as it once was. Just recently we've seen it work wonders in Techland's more accessible (albeit far simpler) *Dying Light*, which gave us a whole city to explore. *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* is treading similar ground, so how does DICE hope to differentiate their primary coloured vision of the future?

"On the team we actually talk about the game as a free roaming title," says Erik Odeldahl, Catalyst's design director, of the reboot's more open-world leanings. "What we've done is make sure that it's not just one giant sandbox that we drop the player into. The gameplay is skill-based and not always something the player will fully understand from the get go. So as you unlock new parts of the city we make sure that the challenge level for those parts is – hopefully! – at the level where you are skill-wise."

Making a scene

Even though we enjoyed dashing through *Dying Light*'s city of Harran, even the walking dead couldn't stop samey scenery from sinking in after a while. It's a problem Odeldahl is keen to avoid. "We make sure that each part that you explore is also visually different from the last. So you don't only explore the same type of aesthetics. Every time you come to some place new, we want to astound you, we want to make you go 'oh shit!' This is either a beautiful place, or a horrible place, whatever emotion we're after from you at that particular time. But we also want to give players a good reason to go back on side missions, or run races, or just to explore. That's one of my main things that I love the most about the game. As you grow as a player and you get deeper and deeper into the storyline there are loads of reasons to go back to areas you've





ABOVE These city shots have inspired us to parkour to work. Hope they find Tom's body soon.



OXM
SAYS



Matthew
Castle

"While we're on the subject of first-person physicality, isn't it time for a Riddick comeback? Starbreeze's Vin Diesel sims brilliantly conveyed weight and heft behind a pair of magical floating fists. Wouldn't say no to *Condemned*, either."



Alex Dale

"First-person scampering is always fated to be messy because it's tricky to judge precisely where your body ends. The best games embrace this, but *Mirror's Edge* aspires for something with more finesse – the results will be interesting."



Tom Stone

"I doubted first-person leaping could ever work. But post-*Dying Light*, I'm sold. I don't want to watch some third-person protagonist go for a run, I want it to feel like my face is smacking the wall. Yeah, I'm not good at these games."

"Every time you come to some place new, we want to astound you"

in a gaming scene where we've all grown begrudgingly accustomed to designated jumping zones.

Wander woman

With everything fully interactive, the more time you spend leaping around Faith's city, the more you'll come to rely on your instincts, with muscle memory serving to remind you of the distances between obstacles and where potential platforms are in relation to each other. It's a smart design, and far from DICE's only trick for giving players a helping hand.

"There are hidden mechanisms going around in the animations and in the code where we actually help the player a bit invisibly," explains Odeldahl, of the game's subtle ways of directing you from behind the scenes. "It's not about making the player never fail, because I'm pretty sure they will from time to time. But as a player, it is actually more awesome to *almost* miss that jump. That is a better feeling – 'I can't believe I didn't die!'" So rather than an automatic helping hand kicking in after a missed leap – like in 2008's misguided *Prince of Persia* reboot – *Catalyst* is simply more forgiving than its predecessor. It uses near-misses to teach you the limitations of your virtual body, then lets you work out the rest.

DICE are very keen to stress that *Catalyst* is no sequel or prequel, but a 'reboot'. But if they're keen to start again, surely it would have been tempting to conjure up a new main character? Why keep Faith? "It never, ever came up," says Odeldahl.



"Because Faith was such a big part of *Mirror's Edge*. *Mirror's Edge* without Faith to me is unthinkable. I'm not saying that you can't create *Mirror's Edge* games without Faith. Who knows? Maybe we will end up doing that, sometime in the future. But for the reboot it needed to be about her. The game is about Faith and it's about her in the world, against the world and with the world."

Weapons free

But sticking with Faith meant losing other features, which is why you won't see the return of the divisive (rubbish) shooting sections from the original game. "Yes, you could change the shooting – make it snappier, faster, and so on," concedes Odeldahl, "but we also felt that shooting isn't a part of what Faith does. It never felt right to us. So then it was like, 'okay, let's take that out'. It's interesting, because it creates a dynamic. How do you handle that then, as a runner? How do you handle it as a player, or as a game designer, even? Some characters are shooting at you – how can we make that a fun experience? An interesting experience? And what we wanted to do was focus on your



movement, on the moves you pull off and the speed you have. And it created a good framework that we felt is what we should do. What we should stick to. And it hasn't been easy – first-person melee combat is hard! But I'm really happy with it."

What was a novelty in 2008 is now our most anticipated parkour title of 2016. With *Dying Light* proving it can work, and the *Assassin's Creed* series making like a gap year student

and taking time off to find itself, this could be the moment first-person running and jumping takes the lead, shoving third-person views into the dirt. Just please, please, *please* don't try to make a virtual reality version. First-person parkour is one thing, but the world, and our stomachs, definitely aren't ready for that. **OXM**

Mirror's Edge Catalyst hops, skips and jumps onto Xbox One on 9 June

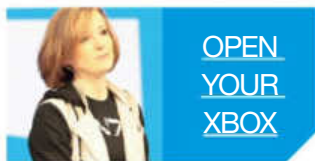
ABOVE Not only is she stealing from the bobbies, but Faith's shoes will scuff their pristine floors.

LEFT A grappling hook helps Faith zip across wider gaps. Don't call it cheating; call it common sense.



011

→ ON THE (MIRROR'S) EDGE OF YOUR SEAT? TELL US AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK



OPEN
YOUR
XBOX

Living room developer

Time to put your money where your mouth is as Microsoft give everyone an Xbox One dev kit



For most of us, the path a game idea has to take to get from inside your head on to a TV screen is unfathomable.

Sure, the rise of the indie scene hints at power to the people, but you still need to jump through more hoops than a performing seal. But in one simple move, Microsoft lowers the barrier of entry to anyone with thumbs (sorry, seals). With one download you can activate your retail Xbox One as a dev kit. Next thing you know, you're the next Notch. And yes, *OXM* can mail subscriptions to your LA party palace.

The key to unlocking this power is the Dev Mode Activation app, currently available from the on-console store in preview form (final rollout follows this summer). Once downloaded it gives simple steps to set your console up to test PC-developed Universal Windows Platform (UWP) apps on your TV.

Some dismiss this as irrelevant to gamers, saying all a retail dev kit

is good for is running virtual photo albums and pizza delivery apps. As ID@Xbox's Agostino Simonetta explains it, it is different from existing developer gear. "With a [standalone] dev kit you get exclusive access to the hardware – practically nothing runs apart from the OS. On a retail to

"Nothing's stopping you switching your machine today"

dev kit – the UWP platform running on Windows 10 – you have access to a subset of resources."

Should your ambitions outpace that "subset", then Xbox's indie wing is waiting for your call. "If they start with the retail dev kit and realise that they need more resources, we're going to give them a dev kit," says Simonetta. As in the case of all indie games, this

RIGHT Could you be the genius behind the next *Superhot*? Time to hop into Dev Mode and see.

BELOW RIGHT You don't need an incredi-budget to be beautiful, as gothic platformer *Bloodstained* proves.



means applying to ID@Xbox and going through their processes.

Even if that *Minesweeper* clone you've been dreaming of isn't going to end up on the Xbox store tomorrow, nothing's stopping you switching your machine and getting it up and running on your TV today. Don't underestimate the magic of that – as Simonetta notes, "consoles will always have a special place in any developer or hobbyist developer's heart, so this is big news for them." **OXM**

OXM
SAYS



Matthew Castle

"Already my mind fizzles with possibilities. How about an app where my face floats around the Xbox One home menu, blocking tiles and being a general nuisance? The only way to get rid of it is to subscribe to *OXM*. Who wants to help me build it?"



Alex Dale

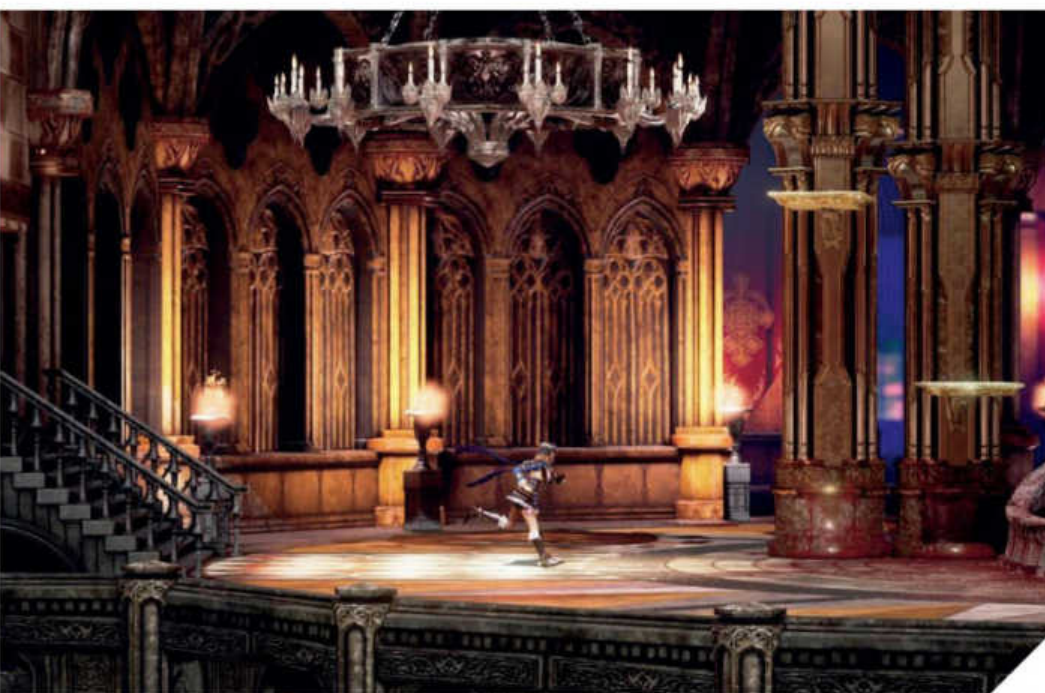
"Whether we see an influx of new voices hinges on how easy and intuitive the tools are to use; my career in development stalled before it got out of the garage after wrestling with *Shoot 'Em Up Construction Kit* on the Commodore 64."



Tom Stone

"Having reviewed some dire Xbox 360 indie games, the threat of another glut of novice bedroom developers terrifies me. But maybe the next Peter Molyneux is already at work on a project so ambitious, it makes *Gears 4* look like *Pong*."

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PLAY/EJECT

THE THINGS PUSHING OUR BUTTON (OR NOT)



Domino's Pizza app

No, we're not slobs – it's research for work. 12 delicious slices of stuffed crust, pepperoni flavoured research.



Titanfall 2

The sequel will be fully revealed at E3 but we do know that some mighty mechs can carry swords. Should give it a 10 now, right?



Background music

Xbox One's summer update will let us play our own jams over games, like in the good ol' Xbox 360 days. Across the globe, game composers weep.



Dark Souls III

How do you review a game you can't finish? Answer: beat Tom with the rod until he does finish it.



Our Gears 4 beta performance

We'd offer more in-depth analysis of the beta's tactical intricacies if we didn't spend most of our time as meaty chunks.



Deadline birthdays

What better way for Tom to celebrate his 24th year on Earth than writing a contents page and around 500 screen captions. Have a good one, bud.

ABOUT
THAT
SPACE

Need to know

One page, all the facts. This month, an RPG that's out of this world: [Mass Effect Andromeda](#)

1 NEW HERO IS A HUMAN

Shepard is long gone. In his/her place? Meet Pathfinder, the leader of a new group of explorers wholly removed from the old cast. Late last year, senior BioWare Montreal character artist Furio Tedeschi shared high-res images of the male Pathfinder model's standard N7 armour set online, and while the helmet looks distinctly Quarian-like, the studio's emphasis on Andromeda being about humanity's next chapter destroys all hope of alien protagonist options. This is slightly disappointing given the series' rich diversity of species – alas, for now our Krogan adventures must remain limited to our cosplay. Expect biotics and Omni-Tool enhanced tech talents to return, plus get ready to fulfil Boba Fett fantasies: Pathfinder owns a jetpack, seemingly used for traversal and boost-jumping into ranged melee strikes.

2 IT'S SET IN A NEW GALAXY

It's called *Andromeda* for a reason, and thank the Reapers said reason isn't a tie-in with the shonky Gene Roddenberry show. The spiral Andromeda galaxy (its Helix Cluster, if last year's plot leak is to be believed) plays host to the next *Mass Effect*, and it's a cool 2.5 million light years away from the Milky Way, the setting of the original trilogy. Your mission is to find a new home for humanity, and that means exploring planets people never visited before.

3 HUMANS ARE BAD GUYS

Just because mankind's never visited the Andromeda galaxy

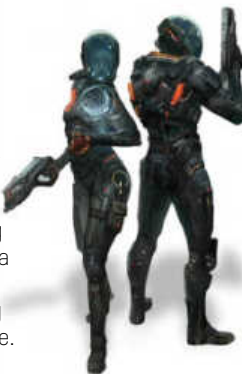


ABOVE The new armour set mixes familiar N7 ceramic plates with more malleable fabric and padding.

before doesn't mean other species haven't. A recent marketing survey allegedly sent out by EA opens with the idea that "WE are the aliens – opposed by a deadly indigenous race bent on stopping us." Of course, that doesn't mean you're suddenly the Kyo Ren of the series, and said indigenous species may very well have dubious justification for all-out hostility, but leading an invading force – no matter the purity of its intentions – is a welcome flip on the themes of the original trilogy.

4 ALIEN SEX SCENES ARE EVEN RAUNCHIER

So says senior cinematic animator Tal Peleg, who took to Twitter to proclaim that "animating a romance culmination on Andromeda isn't as easy as I'd imagine" before posting a gif of a very steamy looking Charlie Sheen. Ready that wolf whistle.



5 LOCATIONS ARE BIGGER THAN EVER

The same survey claims that Andromeda's a "planet-dense but seamless open-world galaxy." Does that suggest we'll planet-hop by piloting our ship through space, *Elite Dangerous*-style? We can't say until E3 (though a distinctly Galaxy Map-esque feature has already been seen in the teaser trailers), but we do know that the worlds themselves will be bigger than ever. The original's Mako rover is back as a drivable vehicle, and a picture of the game in action reveals the new M40 model churning up dust as it crosses a wide-open desert. Don't be surprised if the "seamless" part is instead referring to the ability to jump in and out of the Mako to transition from exploration to combat sequences, like in *Destiny*'s interplay between vehicles and action. With DICE's impressive Frostbite engine powering this adventure (instead of the first trilogy's Unreal technology), BioWare isn't holding back when it comes to world sizes and fidelity.

6 IT'S DELAYED UNTIL EARLY 2017

Don't bother putting it on your Christmas list. In an earnings conference call in early March, EA's Chief Financial Officer Blake Jorgensen confirmed that *Mass Effect Andromeda* had been delayed until the start of 2017. At least it's consistent with the series' release windows: *Mass Effect 2* launched late in January 2010, while *Mass Effect 3* was released in early March 2012. **OXM**

For more on *Mass Effect Andromeda* check out our next issue on 3 June

→ FOR THE LATEST ON MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA VISIT WWW.GAMESRADAR.COM/



END
OF AN
ERA

Decade of Distraction

After ten years, Microsoft finally ceases production of the Xbox 360

Ten years and five months. That's an eternity. The courts would give you less for committing most serious crimes (like, say, claiming Killzone is better than Halo). But that's the number the Xbox 360 has clocked out at, after Microsoft announced in April that they were finally ceasing production of the ageing console.

The writing has been on the wall for Microsoft's concave marvel for a while now; after bravely standing shoulder to shoulder with Xbox One for the first few years of its successor's life – when we saw gutsy ports of new-gen titles such as *Alien: Isolation* and *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* – cracks first began to appear in 2015. The Xbox 360 version of *Call of Duty: Black Ops III*, for example, was forced to omit the campaign mode entirely, as new releases began to cut the cord of the Xbox 360's 84 million-strong user base in favour of squeezing more

juice from the Xbox One. Looking ahead to late 2016, the Xbox 360's release schedule is looking as sparse as Donald Trump's 'do, so now is clearly the right time to pull the plug.

It's sad, but inevitable. And really, looking back, who at the time could have predicted the Xbox 360 would last so long? After all, the console it replaced in November 2005, the Xbox 1 (not to be confused with, er, the Xbox One), was abruptly culled in 2006 after just five years of life.

But then, it's often said that the Xbox 1 was little more than a pricey advert for the Xbox 360. This was the console where Microsoft's investment into the online and social aspects of gaming finally paid off, giving the Xbox brand its distinct identity and helping break Sony's monopoly. We owe the Xbox 360 a lot. Farewell, sweet prince. [*Salutes as console is slowly raised into the attic.*] OXM



TOP The Xbox 360 underwent a few facelifts during its time on our plane of existence.



BARREL WATCH

GAMING'S FAVOURITE
PROP RATED BY OUR
RESIDENT COOPER



Dark Souls III

"The layman's eye is drawn to the chair. But look just to the right,

and you'll be rewarded with a whole pyramid of our rotund friends. You're most welcome!"



Gears of War 4

"How ghastly. Is this what passes for a barrel at the

Academy these days? Young coopers are permitted their nervous early fumbles, but do not lay them out for all to see."



Halo 5

"One buckled yellow barrel is a delicious treat, but two? It is a fiesta!

An ecstasy! Today I have truly doubled my pleasure and my eyes will never be the same."



Resident Evil 6

"Tragic rust may have stricken her – see how

the old girl sags – but there's no mistaking that form. A beauty that transcends time."



Adam Venture: Origins

"After years of lobbying me to write

this Barrel Watch column, you taunt me with visceral images of their dead? Shame on you."

RIGHT The new
Surface Recon
Vehicles give
you a new way to
explore planets.



THE
BIG
PICTURE

Bring me the horizon

Going full Armstrong in Elite Dangerous

When *Elite Dangerous* first launched, it was estimated that it would take its community a grand total of 150,895 years to map the entire galaxy. It's a good thing there's no Achievement tied to it, eh?

Said timeframe is only set to grow with the arrival of *Horizons* to Xbox One, a season of expansions that introduces planetary landings, a loot and crafting system, and a complete mission overhaul. Jetting down to a planet's surface to sniff out geological wonders or surprise civilisations reminds us of *Mass Effect 1*'s Mako exploration, albeit multiplied

by 60 billion planets and minus the promise of interspecies boffing.

For those who found life in space too aimless, it adds more recognisably game-y structures; for those fully absorbed in their second life as a space trucker, it only deepens the fantasy. Released to acclaim on PC last December, *Horizons* will arrive on Xbox One with previous updates intact and more to come. Over the next year it'll expand to let co-op pals work on crews and add ship-launched fighters. It's becoming the *Battlestar Galactica* sim of our dreams. Its 2016 release needs to hurry the frak up. **OXM**

017

OXM
DISCUSS

What we think about the 'leaked' Red Dead Redemption 2 map

Swimming, mountains, hunting and... a Mafia III crossover?



LEFT Will a young John Marston be back in *Red Dead 2*, or will we be playing as someone else entirely?

Rumblings that the long-awaited sequel to the 2010 smash hit *Red Dead Redemption* will be unveiled at E3 have been

gathering pace for a while now, and reached fever pitch in April when an image supposedly showing off the game's map briefly appeared online.

A source close to the game's development team confirmed to our sister site TechRadar that the map is indeed genuine, and suggests that the game, subtitled *Legends of the West*, will be a prequel, set before the days of railway tracks and cars. Set before the frontier's border began to creep westwards, it'll feature a map many times larger than the original. What do we think of *that*, eh?

Alex: They've done this the wrong way round, haven't they? The original's 'dying days of the Wild West' schtick was one of the most unique settings in gaming. Will a straight up cowboy game feel a bit... vanilla after that?

Matthew: As much as I adored it, I actually felt that *Redemption's* moral hand-wringing and regret-filled hero slightly soured the western fantasy for me. That I spent all my spare time holding up trains and tying nuns to the rail tracks showed there's legs in more traditional cowboy fare.

Tom: So you want to play the great, great grandfather of *GTA V's* Trevor?

Matthew: Why not? I know fans harp on about Rockstar's writing 'coming of age' with Marston, but they also built the best virtual horse and six shooter I've seen in a game. I just want to use them.

Alex: Agreed – everyone remembers the plot twists and the time spent galloping across the open plains, but it was the sharpshooting that kept you in the moment. The gunplay has a snarl that GTA's doesn't. With *Red Dead 2* poised to show the Wild West in its pomp, I'd expect to see a wilder, more dangerous world.

Matthew: *RDR* fell into Rockstar's favourite trope of the hero serving multiple masters – playing two warring sides off each other. Rewind the clock to the truly lawless badlands, where it's every man for himself, and they wouldn't have that crutch for mission design.

Tom: I always thought a good protagonist for a Rockstar sandbox would be one who giggles every time you shoot an NPC or commit a crime. The laughter getting louder and more manic the more sins you commit, until it replaces all your other dialogue. So if Matthew wants to play as a rootin'-tootin' psychopathic cowboy, he can have him. Actually, he'd work well for the lawless badlands setting. People aren't going to be fussed about hiring a jolly serial killer then, if he gets results.

Alex: Do we think we'll be playing as a younger John Marston? Or that uncle of his with the piss-beard? Or someone new altogether?

Tom: How about all three? I wouldn't be surprised if post *GTA V*, Rockstar gave us multiple protagonists again.

Matthew: Oooh! You could play as the gang you were hunting in *Redemption* – see how things were before they started putting lead in each other. Could use *GTA V*'s character hopping to plan heists – do you play as the guy on the horse or the guy on the other horse? I haven't thought this through, but it could be good.

Alex: Guys, we gotta talk about the amount of water on the map. We just gotta. I fancy we'll be getting our spurs a-soggy in the sequel – there

OXM PANEL



Matthew Castle
Editor

Matthew loves the western cliches so much he'll probably shriek 'yeehaw' at least once in this roundtable chat.



Alex Dale
Deputy editor

Alex is the closest thing OXM has to a real-life bandit, in that he once stole a Wham bar from a small newsagents.



Tom Stone
Staff writer

Tom admitted to the team that he only played the first hour of *RDR*. See if you can work that out for yourself.

are even islands dotted around that look ripe for plundering. If nothing else, it'll break up the endless redness of the desert.

Tom: Didn't you need scuba gear to get the most out of *GTA V*'s seabed? I don't know if I want *Red Dead* to start emulating *Black Flag*. There appears to be a prison on the map – I'm far more interested in stringing up crooks and dragging them across the desert to be locked up.

Matthew: You just know that you'll be busting in or out of that bad boy at some point. Not that I'm advocating a 'you've been locked up with none of your equipment' bit – that's been done to death. I'm also intrigued by the swamps and 'New Bordeaux' – that's the fictional setting for *Mafia III*. Bit of 2K cross-branding?

Alex: Makes you wonder what other franchises will be brought into the fold, doesn't it? Not looking forward to the bit where they revive the NHL 2K brand with a bit of the ol' sand hockey. Also: your stick is a rattlesnake.

Matthew: Still a better mini-game than *Redemption*'s liar's dice.

Tom: I played too much poker in the first game. The map is unsurprisingly bigger than last time, but is that a good thing? Endless horse riding could get tedious last time.

Alex: They seemed to hit a sweet spot with the original map size; there was little to do in the wilderness but soak in the atmosphere, but although it took a while to get to your destination it was never allowed to drag. A bigger world will need to be a busier world – there's definitely room for improvement on the hunting side of things. It could even be married to a *Scooby Doo gulp sound effect* c-c-c-crafting system?

Matthew: I'm up for more varied terrain – the map hints at mountains and, er, bogs – but I agree that *RDR*'s signature stillness could easily transform into the less attractive 'emptiness' if stretched too thin. It'll just be a desert dotted by hundreds of bastards trying to trick you with their 'my cart's broken' routine. Hey, at least we'll have that tasty revolver to show them what for. Yeehaw!

The original *RDR* ranked 4th in our readers' 100 best Xbox 360 game list

!

Don't quote me

FROM THEIR MOUTHS TO
YOUR EARS VIA OUR PEN

"We are working on fixing the exploit. Obviously it is against our Code of Conduct and the team is looking into what can be done in terms of punishment."

Ubisoft, gritting their teeth and promising to crack down on players cheating in *The Division*. Can we have our characters back now?

"Studio Ghibli movies, Disney was a huge influence, lots of expressionist paintings, nature... anything can inspire you basically!"

Johannes Fighlhuber, artist on *Ori and the Blind Forest*, talking influences after the game won a (deserved) BAFTA for artistic achievement.

"There was a real worry about it because we were making a very serious World War 2 Pacific campaign story, and we were dealing with a serious subject matter."

Jason Blundell, Director of *Zombies* mode at Treyarch, on the concerns about introducing the *Zombies* in *Call Of Duty: World at War*. Guess that worked out for them in the end.



"With RDR2 poised to show the Wild West in its pomp, I'd expect to see a wilder, more dangerous world"

FOREST GRUMP



GEARS OF WAR 4
PUBLISHER
 MICROSOFT STUDIOS
DEVELOPER
 THE COALITION
RELEASE DATE
 11 OCTOBER

Scene by scene

OXM applies its eagle eye to the latest game trailers



1

The trailer opens with a glimpse of life on Sera, after the planet was irradiated at the end of *GoW 3*. With no fuel, the locals are forced to return to a simpler life...



2

...and that includes hero of the day Marcus Fenix, who has retreated to civilian life and apparently now lives on a humble homestead in the countryside.



3

Suddenly, the scene flits to a chase scene in a dark, windswept forest. It's disorientating and confusing, and you never quite get a clear glimpse of the assailants...



4

...and then back to calmer times. After planting a tree, Marcus takes a moment to embrace his family. It's Anya Stroud! And a young JD. Oooh, it's a flashback!



5

Present day. As JD blind-fires in panic, we see flashes of new, horrific enemy kinds... most pressingly, a group of flesh-hungry Juvies snapping at your heels. Eek!



6

The flashback ends with Marcus carving his son's initials in the newly-rooted tree. It's a poignant moment that gets more so when we cut back to the present and see...



7

...a fallen tree with the same initials. It's felled not by the snarling Pouncer that's stalking you (although he certainly doesn't help matters), but by the vicious wind.



8

A byproduct of the fallout, Sera is now stricken by spontaneous electrical wind vortexes that shake up fire-fights. JD dives behind cover, and gets ready to fight back.

what is it?

New console, new story arc: *GoW 4* picks up the story 25 years after the events of the Xbox 360 games. The planet Sera has been reduced to an agricultural backwater, one plagued by murderous windstorms and a new, faster mutant menace in the form of The Swarm. It follows the antics of JD Fenix – son of the series' previous protagonist, the granite-jawed Marcus Fenix. Speaking of whom...



BRICK
UP A
STORM

Lore and First Order

Meet [Graham Goring](#), the man plugging the gaps in modern Star Wars lore

Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens doesn't just dip last December's blockbuster in plastic, it fills the gaps between it and *Episode VI*, building out the Star Wars universe in its own self-contained galaxy far, far away. "I don't think you'd really call [what we've added] canon," explains lead story designer Graham Goring, "because if you watch the film there were very few plastic people in it – so it's *Lego Star Wars*. But the fact is, Lucas have weighed in, they are the people who kind of originated this stuff."

Throughout development, LucasArts would tell the game's developers, Traveller's Tales, which events *Lego Star Wars* could cover, signing off on writing produced and edited by Goring and his team. When EA recently discussed why they weren't bringing the Star Wars prequels into *Star Wars Battlefront*, the publisher said they couldn't violate universe canon. But Traveller's Tales are in a unique position and are therefore granted much more freedom, thanks to their parody-laden universe being its own thing.

Goring even created a brand new character called Varond Jelik, who accompanies Han Solo in one level. "I think it helps that we've made these *Lego Star Wars* games for a long time, so LucasFilm and ourselves have a great working relationship, and they know that we are never going to do anything that would dishonour the



ABOVE Graham Goring has been with Traveller's Tales since 2008, working on games such as *Lego Harry Potter* and *Lego Jurassic World*.

memory of Star Wars," says Goring. "So there's a level of freedom and trust there, which is wonderful because we love Star Wars and we want to make the best Star Wars game. You really don't want to annoy the fans of Star Wars because we are legion. If I got something wrong, I would be sending an angry email to myself. You know, 'you've capitalised *that* wrong!'"

Of the game's 18 levels, seven explore events outside of *The Force Awakens*, bridging the gaps between the films and bolstering the game with surprises. One section sees you accompanying Han and Chewbacca as they hunt the Rathtars – those slimy, tentacled beasts that wreak

havoc aboard the Millennium Falcon in the movie. Goring wouldn't be drawn on more examples, however. "We want to keep the surprise," he says, "because four of those seven levels are stories that have never been told before – we're the first ones to tell those stories."

This suggests that three of these levels will cover events from previous movies or stories taken from the wider Star Wars universe – novels, comics and the like – which certainly explains the picture seen above, showing Vader giving the Emperor a rematch. We can't wait to see more. **OXM**

Want even more *Lego Star Wars*? We visit *Lego Jakku* over on page 36...

REQ-ING
BALL

Firefight takes off

Four-day beta proves that Halo 5's forthcoming horde mode will be a force to be REQ-koned with

Halo 5's Warzone mode has been little short of a revelation, its big-scale maps and footloose structure giving

Spartans a place to de-stress and stretch their legs between intense sessions of Arena warfare – and cut loose with some of the game's more exotic weaponry into the bargain.

But, fun as it is, we found ourselves wishing we could put those huge, expansive maps to use for something with a little more competitive bite. Something, like (ooh, let's say) *Halo: ODST's* much-loved Firefight mode, which sees a team of co-operative players tackle increasingly difficult waves of Covenant attackers.

Well, praise be, because those very specific prayers will be answered this summer when 343 roll out the much-anticipated Warzone Firefight update. As we learned over a four-day trial run, the two modes are a natural fit for each other. To compensate for the larger playing area, the mode supports eight players, and to compensate for the higher player count, the difficulty has been ramped up considerably, to ensure everyone has to contribute to the battle and no-one can hide and get lost in the shuffle. The end result, 343 Industries brag, is the largest on-screen enemy count in *Halo* history, and while we didn't have time to count them on our fingers (plus, the grunts won't sit still), 343's boast certainly *feels* right – at times it's a downright onslaught. After making

your fingers bleed for four rounds, 343 then proceeds to wrench them backwards for the final act, with the new 'Mythic' boss class. If the factory-model Warden Eternal didn't make you madder than a bag of swans to begin with, then try tackling the trumped-up version, capable of spewing multiple lasers. Did we mention you only have five minutes to complete each round?

In 'horde' modes such as this, properly preparing for the next round in the intermission period is always important, and more so here than ever, as you have full access to the

"The difficulty is ramped up, so everyone has to contribute and no one can hide"

REQ station. There are, broadly speaking, three different types of mission: on top of the aforementioned boss battles, there are also missions where your objective is to defend a base, or scour the map for enemies to rub out. Selecting the right tool for the job is essential: a Ghost is going to be a duffer of a choice if you're defending a cramped interior, but if you need something nippy that can bomb around the plains looking for elusive enemies? Perfect.

It pays not to be too stingy with your supplies at the REQ station,

RIGHT No chance of getting lost in the co-op crowd with enemies made of PURE GRANITE.

BELOW We also learned this month that an upcoming update will weaken the vicious Warden Eternal in single-player.

ever
green

One of the qualities we loved most in our time with Warzone Firefight was that the objectives were dynamic – instead of fixed challenges that repeated every time you boot the mode up, the game dug deep into its impressive repertoire of terrain and enemy types and remixed itself on the fly. It meant we were never presented with the same challenge twice, keeping the experience box fresh.

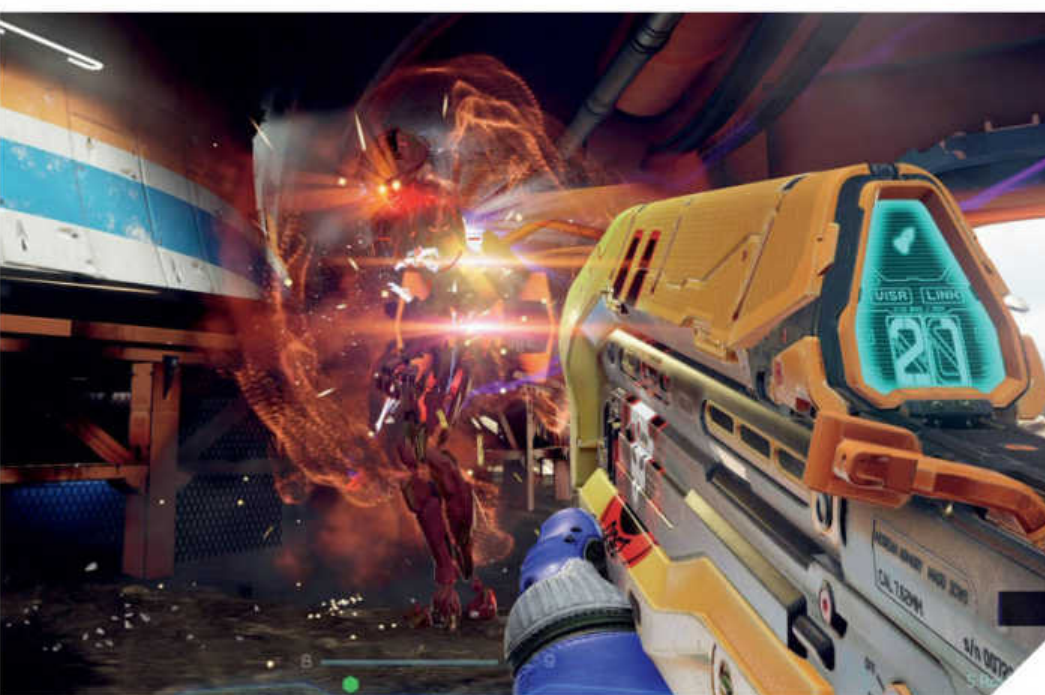


because the faster your team topples the targets in each round, the more experience points and requisition energy you acquire. Well-oiled teams will be able to cycle through the weapon trees quickly and efficiently, to be completely tooled up by the time the Mystics waddle onto the screen for the mode's pad-melting finale.

It was frantic, it was brutal, and you know what? We needed a few games of garden-variety Warzone afterwards, just to de-stress. Firefight has gone back in the 343 Industries oven for re-tweaking and re-tooling following the beta feedback, but the finished thing should be up and running before the summer's out. **OXM**

Read about where the Master Chief story began with our [Halo: Combat Evolved retrospective](#) on page 102

→ BET YOU'VE GOT A HOT TAKE ON THIS. SHARE IT AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK



HOT TOPIC

WHAT ELSE SHOULD 343 BRING BACK TO HALO 5?



Halo: Reach-style Infection. The Flood was a good idea but they made the game type uncustomisable in *Halo 4* – a mistake.
Gabe Gickling



The Invasion! If Elites were playable and Prometheans too, it'd bring back memories and maybe even a few lapsed Halo fans.
Ethan Epsy



Just a proper File Share system. *Halo 5*'s Forge is the most advanced Forge yet, but no one can share their works without a decent sharing tool.
Lee Haywood



It may be just me, but I'd love bot matches against AI controlled Spartans.
Joseph Demoni



Rocket Hog Rally, and the racing mode. We want our races and crazy rocket rallies!
Nathaniel Paskins



BEING ABLE TO PLAY SPLITSCREEN!!!!
Robert Tambascio



I want a playlist of community made game types and maps. Rocket Race, zombies and stuff like that. I kinda want brutes in Firefight and fewer Prometheans.
Justin Beale

Think you know better than Justin Beale? Weigh in at facebook.com/oxmuk

ALL TALK
NO PLAY

Duncan Jones

Is it possible to make a good videogame movie? The director of *Warcraft: The Beginning* tells us how...

Videogames and Hollywood have had an uneasy relationship – did you see those *Resident Evil* films? But the tide is turning. Game creators and directors are rubbing shoulders, and a generation of smart, younger directors, weaned on games, are making sure they're treated with respect. On the eve of his take on the *Warcraft* universe, *Warcraft: The Beginning*, we spoke to director Duncan Jones about why 'videogame adaptation' is no longer a dirty word.

When you adapt a game into a film, some would argue you're losing the defining factor – the interactivity. What element of the game do you hope to bring to *Warcraft*?

Most simply put, it's that heroes can come from anywhere. That's always been one of the defining elements of the *Warcraft* universe. I'd go so far as to say *all* Blizzard games. [Whether it's *Diablo* or *StarCraft*] you are the hero, no matter what side you're on. Your story is that of a hero. Our film stays true to that, while introducing an audience to the explosion of ideas that make up the world of Azeroth.

You've said that *Warcraft* isn't a simple good vs. evil story. Do you think an over-reliance on simple good versus evil tropes is a problem with game narratives?

No judgement from me there. I play *XCOM* pretty constantly, and it doesn't get much more straightforward than that! Aliens bad. Humans good. Kill aliens! I think in film, you do have a responsibility to engage the audience on a more emotional level, and in that world, nuance can be a powerful tool... but again, not always. The original *Independence Day* worked great. Aliens bad. Humans good. Kill aliens!

A lot of adaptations fail because they disregard what made the game appeal to its fans in the first place.



"In film, you have a responsibility to really engage the audience on a much more emotional level"

What's more important – appealing to fans or bringing it to a new audience?

Well, I don't think we can be accused of disregarding the fans, as large numbers of the people making the film *are* those fans. We want it done right, because we are the audience.

Some sniffy critics write off CGI-heavy films as 'like watching a videogame'. Do you worry that people may lob the accusation at *Warcraft*?

I can't control critics, and why would I want to? All I hope is that critics are there as audience members first. If they feel like they haven't wasted their time after watching a film I make, I hope that will come out in their public reaction. Visual effects aren't

going anywhere, and stylised visuals have been a point of critical argument since before Picasso put a lady's ear on the side of her face! Does *Starry Night* look photo real? In my mind, the only thing that matters is, were you swept up in a piece of art?

We recall hearing a story about *Grand Theft Auto IV* having an impact on how you filmed a particular scene in *Source Code*. Is that true?

Absolutely. There's a particular shot in *Source Code* where Jake jumps off a moving train. I thought it'd be fun to make it an homage to *GTA* by having the stunt play out the same way a player might experience getting out of a moving car in game. It was actually a pretty complicated effects shot, but I liked that it subconsciously reflected the underlying game mechanic ideas at the heart of our film.

Remedy recently combined film and videogame storytelling with *Quantum Break*. Does that appeal to you?

I don't know *Quantum Break* – I'm a PC gamer, don't hate me! Games allow a breadth of experience, but are limited in their ability to dynamically create a narrative of real depth. At least for now... now that AlphaGo has beaten humanity at the ancient game of GO, maybe we are around the corner from AI Stephen Kings in every console, writing narrative on the fly as they make up increasingly complex stories in virtual sandboxes. We're not there yet, though!

***Warcraft* aside, do you have a favourite videogame movie?**

Mortal Kombat was a guilty pleasure. Christopher Lambert and that title track! That whole CD was good driving music back in those days.

Warcraft: The Beginning chops, roars and swoops into cinemas on 10 June

First appearing on our radar with 2009's sci-fi mystery *Moon*, Jones actually has a background in games – he was the in-game cinematics director on *Republic: The Revolution*, an eastern European politics sim for PC. He has continued to wow cinemagoers with 2011's *Source Code*, and is about to unleash *Warcraft: The Beginning*.

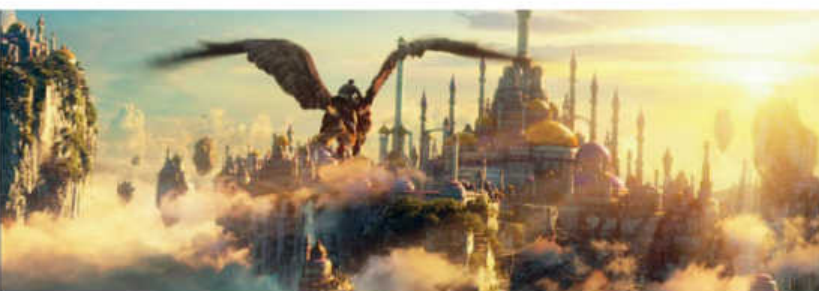
→ WHO WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR FROM NEXT? TELL US AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK



ABOVE Jones has played Warcraft for 20 years - starting with *Orcs and Humans*. He was partial to *Lost Vikings*, too. Good taste.

RIGHT Industrial Light and Magic are on CGI duty - imagine if all videogame films were shown this level of love. Instead we get *Max Payne*. Brrr.

BELOW Even the cast are fans - Rob Kazinsky, who plays Orgrim Doomhammer, was a world ranked Death Knight in *WoW*. Hell of an audition pitch.





**“WARZONE IS AN
ABSOLUTE BLAST”**

Eurogamer.net

**“5 OUT OF 5 – THIS IS
THE FUTURE OF GAMING”**

The Sun



A promotional poster for Halo 5: Guardians. The background is a dark, war-torn landscape with a city in the distance. In the foreground, a large, green, armored figure (a Spartan) is shown from the chest up, looking down. Below the figure, four smaller Spartan figures are standing. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**"ARENA IS CLASSIC HALO
AT ITS FINEST"**

IGN

**"COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER
IS WHERE HALO 5'S AT"**

Eurogamer.net

#HUNT_{THE}TRUTH
HALO 5
GUARDIANS

OUT NOW



Preview

028



The games we want the most



Do you suppose there will ever be a final Final Fantasy? You know, one that wraps it all up? No, us neither.

We're going to make you an offer you can't refuse – reading our *Mafia* preview, that is! Geddit? It's a reference. Okay, maybe a dated reference, but that was only so we could ingeniously point out how well **Mafia III** (p34) avoids such clichés. A series that could've just been a lame *Godfather* clone instead entices us with the most interesting crime sandbox since *GTA V*. Feeding bodies to alligators in the New Orleans swamps sounds like the perfect crime to us, as long as a certain deerstalkered detective isn't on the case. Luckily he's busy battling satanic offspring in **Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter** (p42). You'd expect a game with that subtitle to be a little off-the-wall, and Frogware's eighth Holmes adventure might be his maddest investigation yet. Shoe-shining mini-games to break up the sleuthing? Probably best not to question genius. We were on the verge of hiring ol' Sherls to solve the mysterious case of the decade-long development cycle. But then **Final Fantasy XV** (p30) emerged with an actual release date, and shows *The Devil's Daughter* what a crazy game *really* looks like: flying cars, plates that turn into sea monsters, you turning into a giraffe... A JRPG we were beginning to worry we'd never see is starting to look elementary, our dear Watson. Next month: references from this side of the millennium.



030



034



029

036



038

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Final Fantasy XV



Final Fantasy XV

A mystical green dog shows us how much the RPG has changed in a year

Samuel Roberts

PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX
FORMAT XBOX ONE DUE 30 SEPTEMBER

It's weird to think that *Final Fantasy XV's* existence predates such pillars of modern popular culture as the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* or *Katy Perry's* singing career, but there you go. After ten years in development hell, Square Enix's first full action-RPG in the main *Final Fantasy* series arrives on 30 September.

Until then, we've been treated to another demo to tide us over. This one's a little more technical, but offers an updated snapshot of what to expect from the final game and shows how ideas have evolved since *Episode Duscae*. The Platinum demo is a weird but often impressive aside that takes us into the mind of Noctis, the moody main character and one of many in the cast to maintain fabulous hair while getting his head kicked in.

We're in dream sequence mode here, playing as a young version of Noctis as he manoeuvres through

four dreamscapes: a shimmering lake, a living room where he is shrunk like Alice in Wonderland to clamber over mountain-sized toys, an antiquated cityscape and a town square flanked by high-rise buildings, taken from his home kingdom of Lucis. He is led through these microworlds by series-renowned and adorably useless *Final Fantasy* summon creature Carbuncle, who looks like a green fennec fox with a jewelled horn drilled into its head.

Creature discomforts

Carbuncle's welcome is outstayed in mere minutes, as he is only able to communicate through a series of identical squeaks that become so frequent that your eye will begin to twitch with every last one (play through a second or third time and you might want to drown him in the lake he invites you to jump into in the first area). Still, he looks pretty boss, like a more realistic version of a fantasy creature from an '80s movie, and eventually he gets slapped hard by an enemy. Justice. His connection

"Carbuncle's squeaks become so frequent your eye will twitch with each one"

to Noctis is that his dad gave him a model Carbuncle as a present when he was younger to watch over his dreams – hence he's now the state-approved tour guide through our boy's REM cycle. Noctis is given a toy sword and squeaky hammer to protect him through the dreamscape, as colourful enemies try to turn it into more of a nightmare.

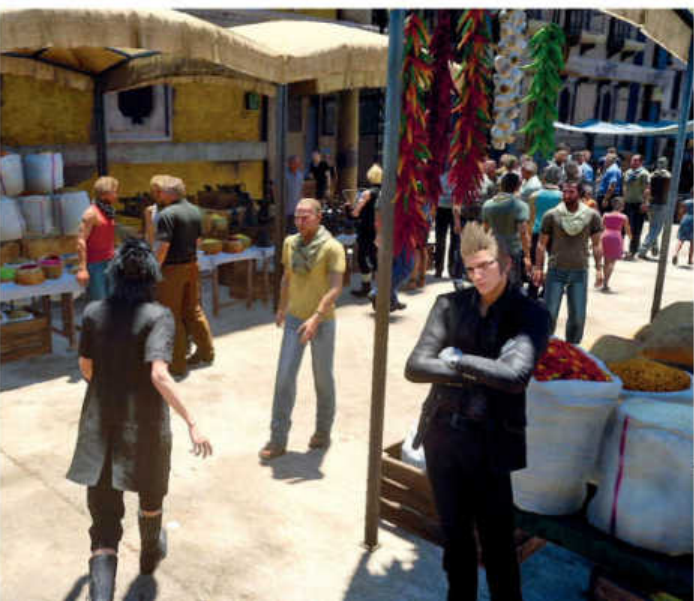
Dotted around each level are a series of plates that Noctis can stand on to perform different actions. Some will change the weather from sunny to rainy, just to show off how damn well the artists at Square Enix have nailed the drizzle, not to mention how Noctis' hair sort of flops down realistically to match. You can change day into night at an instant, too, and see how

gorgeous the dynamic lighting is when it reacts to the sun rising and setting. In the Alice in Wonderland-style room, Noctis can use plates to transform into a number of toy cars, which offer a snapshot of how the driving works in the game – a major component of getting around the open world. In the city dreamscape, players can turn into a strange giraffe thing and one of the boar-like enemies seen in the earlier *Episode Duscae* demo.

Collectable yellow gems are dotted around each location or dropped by enemies after they're subjected to a humiliating death from your toy weapons. Hoover up enough of these and extra plates can be activated, giving Noctis Jr an array of items that grant him spell effects. One of them, Meteorain, produces a storm of bright orange orbs that cleanse the entire target area of enemies, while a water attack creates a mini-waterfall over a foe. Clearly these are designed to give



BELOW XV's towns bustle with NPCs and virtual life, in contrast to FFXIII's barren social scene. It's much nicer.





031



ABOVE How are dudes with hair that ridiculous meant to take on all that lot? It won't end well.

LEFT When cars won't get the job done, Noctis and friends can travel across the oceans on their own boat. The 1%, eh?





032



ABOVE Chocobos are back and can be ridden, as well as called with a whistle.

LEFT A car that transforms into a plane? Very James Bond. Of course, Bond wouldn't be seen dead hanging out with other dudes. No sir.

Final Fantasy XV

“Watching the colossal Leviathan rise from the water is wow inducing”

FLY, YOU PRETTIES

Later in the game, you can upgrade your car – poshly named the Regalia – into a flying variant as part of an extra challenge. You will be able to see the entire world from up high, though landing the thing might be trickier than it is to take off.

→ us a taste of *FFXV*'s full set of abilities and how lavish that will look.

The demo climaxes with a battle against an Iron Giant. One of Final Fantasy's staple enemies, he's an enormous armoured warrior carrying a giant sword. This is the tasty bit we mentioned earlier where Carbuncle gets a good belting. Suddenly kid Noctis turns to adult Noctis, and has access to a more deadly range of attacks (assuming a rubber hammer wouldn't do much damage against the Iron Giant's armour). He's carrying a mighty broadsword, and has access to a fire spell. One element that briefly featured in last year's demo was the ability to teleport to different parts of the environment while Noctis clings onto his weapon. That reappears here, with the added benefit of teleporting up high on tall buildings, where you can discover secret weapons like a shield and shuriken for the boss fight.

Cross swords

XV's combat has made some progress since last year. The UI has changed so the four different attacks Noctis has access to are reached instantly via the D-pad, which is useful mid-combo, whereas last year you had to awkwardly scroll between them. It's still got a way to go in some areas. While the lock-on function with the

right stick definitely works better than it did in last year's demo, we've found that projectiles or spells can often miss or go through the enemy, even if you're aiming in the right direction. If a spell misfires every time an enemy moves during the casting, that's going to get frustrating really quickly.

Likewise, while hitting the Iron Giant with a sword feels really good, the ability to dodge attacks is way too inconsistent. Hitting dodge at the right moment often isn't enough to stop an attack from connecting to Noctis with the bigger enemies – it's not such a problem with the small fry. It's not as simple to use as, say, evading in *Bayonetta*, and it would feel far better to play if that command was more reliable. Square Enix should spend the remaining few months tweaking that combat until it feels as responsive and satisfying as possible. If it's going to be their first time making a mainline Final Fantasy entry with a real-time battle system, they need to make it something that players will feel totally comfortable with for up to 100 hours of play. This still doesn't feel like it's there yet.

What remains impressive about *XV* a year on, though, is the world and the creatures that populate it. One hidden moment we missed the first time through was to the side of the first area's lake, where activating a plate makes the colossal snake-like sea creature Leviathan emerge out of the water in the far distance and swim into a lake behind Noctis. It's a proper wow-inducing moment, and not just because it's Godzilla-sized. There's something about the choice to make *XV*'s art direction so realistic relative to other games in the series that makes the creature's appearance against a dark, rainy sky extra disconcerting. It's how it might feel to see the Loch Ness monster rise out of the water in front of you at night (or something less daft). Otherworldly, but presented like it could be real.

Still, Square Enix's ability to build a gorgeous world and cool creatures was never in doubt. Real-time combat is the challenge ahead for the team. This remains *XV*'s least convincing element, but with a six-month wait ahead of us, there's ample opportunity for Square Enix to bring that up to the standard of everything else in this gorgeous-looking epic. **DXM**



BELOW Rain even seems to affect Noctis' hair in the demo, which is a ludicrous level of detail.





ABOVE Not only do environments feel completely naturalistic, but their strategic potential's high.

RIGHT Machine guns? Powerful but inaccurate at range. Pro tip: that truck has a very large petrol tank...

FAR RIGHT The vintage cars are great to throw around corners at speed. Even more so with a terrified punk riding shotgun.



Mafia III

Mafia III

A cleverer class of crime caper, simply dripping with Southern inhospitality

Dave Houghton

PUBLISHER 2K DEVELOPER HANGAR 13
FORMAT XBOX ONE DUE 7 OCTOBER



HISTORY BOYS

Mafia has always excelled at conjuring up the feel of a specific place and time, and part three is no different. Its city is as eclectic and atmospheric as they come, and with protagonist Lincoln personifying America's major late '60s concerns of civil rights and Vietnam, its narrative isn't shying away from the big questions.

There's no such thing as a side-quest in *Mafia III*. You won't be breaking up your grand criminal exploits with a few rounds of darts at the pub, or putting the empire-building on hold in order to help a drunkard farmer round up his misplaced chickens. That's not to say your options are limited. Indeed, this is a sequel that has clearly noted the criticisms levelled at its predecessor, and has exploded the scope of its open-world gameplay accordingly. It's just that in *Mafia III*, everything you do matters... because *Mafia* has always been the most thoughtful, free-roaming crime sim, and its characters by far the most professional.

Where *Mafia II* was more a – brilliant – linear action game running through a stunningly evocative if slightly empty film-set, *Mafia III* uses its sprawling town-and-country map to its full potential. But crucially, it does so while taking pains to maintain the strength of narrative and character that has always made the series such a unique proposition. As returning Vietnam veteran and former member of the Black Mafia Lincoln Clay, you take part in a huge array of explosive, tyre-screaming, skull-popping activities in your quest for revenge on the Italian kingpin who betrayed your crew. But you do so with both great

freedom of choice and a refreshingly focused sense of purpose.

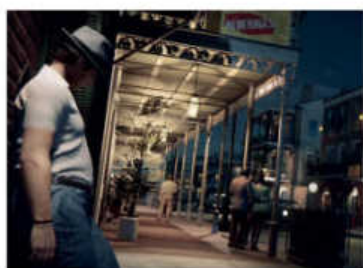
The ultimate goal is to weaken the Italian mob's hold on New Bordeaux – a staggeringly realised late-'60s New Orleans in all but name – in order to topple the top dog. But while *Mafia III* aims to – and does – deliver a cavalcade of exhilarating action, it knows how these things *really* work. Shifting the balance of criminal power isn't about engaging in 40 hours of random action-movie exploits before confronting a boss. It's about smartly chipping away at the structure, taking out the small guys who kick up to the big guys, who kick up to even bigger guys. It's about strategically reducing the enemy's funds and power in order to empower your own organisation, and then maintaining your hold with tactics and often uneasy diplomacy.

Take-over tactics

Want to take down the Italian construction racket? You've got plenty of options for crushing the income it's making from contractor corruption. You can track down and execute its enforcers, reaching your prey with a combination of staunch tactical planning and swift, bloody gunplay. Or you can lift a big cash haul from a heavily guarded local site, bringing in a hit-squad of your own for back-up, or ghost in and out, entirely undetected, as the goons are distracted by the important matter of killing a betrayer or kicking the crap out of an unfortunate hippie. Or maybe you'd prefer to take over the operation piece by piece, combining deliciously fluid stealth, misdirection and all-out assault to tackle huge, omni-directional construction yard battlefields, before 'recruiting' the local boss by scaring the hell out of him with some seriously dangerous driving as he cowers in your stolen ride's passenger seat.

As any given target can be hit from a raft of directions, the objective list provides not so much a plan of attack as a menu of possibilities. Throw in the number of options within those options, afforded by the endlessly accommodating, free-form action, and *Mafia III* has a greater sense of true player authorship than any other recent open-world game. **OXM**

"You take part in an array of explosive, tyre-screaming, skull-popping activities"



Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens



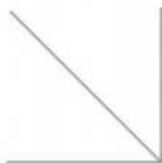
Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens

Traveller's Tales' latest looks as polished as Vader's helmet

Kirk McKeand

PUBLISHER WARNER BROS. DEVELOPER TRAVELLER'S TALES

FORMAT XBOX ONE, XBOX 360 DUE 28 JUNE



PEW-PEW-PEW-PEW

Blaster battles are another addition - these see you cut off and forced to take cover, popping out to shoot off Stormtroopers' helmets, building turrets and using force powers to rain down bricks. We're not sure why you'd use cover against those notorious marksmen, though.

Kylo Ren sits in the darkness peering into Darth Vader's mask. This scene, stripped straight from the movie, is suddenly interrupted by a knock, forcing the stropky Sith to flick on the lights, revealing a pre-teen bedroom plastered with Darth Vader posters, lampshades, quilt covers and other paraphernalia. Bloody fanboy.

This mischievous tone permeates *Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. Remember that trailer shot where Stormtroopers are lined up in a rocking dropship? The lights aren't flickering from turbulence - there's actually an annoying prat messing with the switch. Lego games might have evolved to include speech - indeed, the original cast, including Daisy Ridley, have recorded new lines - but this latest remembers its visual comedy roots. Our hands-on time is a blur of slapstick and voiced gags that manage to raise a smile while staying respectable to the source.

Star-studded

Take the iconic opening text crawl: here it adds flavour before each mission, but it's also authentic, from the font to the aspect ratio. And if you've ever seen a weird little creature in the background of a Star Wars scene, chances are there's a Lego

version of it hidden somewhere here. Every frame is packed with fan service.

Of course, none of this love would matter if the game was a load of old spaceballs. While it's very much what you'd expect from Lego - smashing, building, fighting, platforming and puzzling - it's by far the most polished the series has been. There are also a bunch of lovely new features. We played a section on Jakku, beginning with Rey's brief toboggan ride down the planet's sandy dunes, but here you're collecting studs, dodging debris and jumping over ramps. It's only a short section before being thrown into the level proper, but it's indicative of more variety to come.

Smashing things is still your go-to tactic, but once the rubble starts gathering together and jumping around - signifying it's ready to build - it's no longer just a case of holding a button down and waiting for your character to build whatever contraption pops up. Multi-Build, as it's called, allows you to decide what's created. This is utilised in puzzles where you have to build in the right order (just smash it if it's wrong) and even in combat. In one fight we had the choice between a bubble shield and a deadly drone.

Then there are the flight sections. Lego games aren't afraid of letting you loose with a vehicle (there are 40 here), but it's never been tackled on this scale. We played Rey and Finn's Millennium Falcon Jakku escape, piloting the craft through linear, scrap-filled canyons. After a few minutes, it seamlessly transitioned into an arena dogfight where we had full freedom of movement - within the arena's boundaries, naturally - to barrel roll, loop, accelerate, decelerate and obliterate First Order ships.

It's still a TT Lego game, but these little innovations make a familiar formula feel fresh again. Ultimately, though, how much you love it will still be down to your admiration of the source material. But Star Wars fans are in for a treat, with over 200 playable characters from across the series, 18 levels to use them in and with five explorable hub areas: Jakku, Maz Kantana's bar, Starkiller Base, Resistance HQ and the Millennium Falcon. This looks set to make Kylo Ren-esque fanboys of us all. **OXM**



"It's packed with fan service and is the most polished the series has been by far"



037



ABOVE The 3D flight combat arenas let you control the Millennium Falcon, as well as TIE fighters, X-wings and more.

FAR LEFT Seven of the 18 levels are entirely new stories, bridging the gap between parts VI and VII.

LEFT It's not just new stars from *The Force Awakens* that are unlockable - you'll also find characters from previous movies, as well as other "surprises"...



038

RIGHT McCree is basically Clint Eastwood - an actor so manly, he makes a poncho look tough.

BELOW For 1,000 credits, you can give Tracer a legendary punk makeover. Yay?



Overwatch



Overwatch

One of 2016's most anticipated games. Unless you work for Gearbox, that is

Tom Stone

PUBLISHER BLIZZARD DEVELOPER BLIZZARD
FORMAT XBOX ONE DUE 24 MAY



LEFT Flying characters seem to have an unfair advantage. But good luck finding cover in the sky...

'ello, luv! Got a treat for you, we 'ave! A preview of that there *Overwatch* it be! Cor! We swear this preview will be worth reading despite that terrible first impression, in much the same way *Overwatch* is definitely worth playing despite a hero with an East End accent that even *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* would call 'a bit much, luv'.

Tracer, a spiky haired Brit, has been graced with an atrocious Lahn-dan accent. But she's so fun to control, dashing rings around enemies and turning back time when things don't go her way, that we're willing to look past some tired cockney clichés. She stars in a multiplayer shooter so well balanced, in fact, that reversing time doesn't feel like cheating. That's a feat worthy of a "cor blimey, and it runs at 60fps in multiplayer it does!"

Overwatch is a MOBA/FPS/brawler with a cast of over 20 unique heroes (each with two unique cooldown powers and an ultimate ability) pitched in battle across a competitive multiplayer-focused adventure, but one that also boasts a single-player campaign. Some fools have managed to confuse it with Gearbox's *Battleborn*, a MOBA/FPS/brawler with a cast of over 20 unique heroes (each with two unique cooldown powers and an ultimate ability) pitched in battle across a competitive multiplayer-focused adventure, but one that also boasts a single-player campaign. Oh.

Overwatch's 21 heroes are certainly more distinct than *Battleborn*'s. Take Roadhog, a tank-class beefcake. He uses a chain to whip foes towards

him for a close-up blast from his huge shrapnel-firing scrap gun. Or Winston, a bespectacled ape/scientific genius who uses his trusty Tesla cannon for sophisticated electrical damage, or gives in to his animal instincts and rage jumps into the fray with powerful primal melee attacks. Despite not being a super-intelligent ape, Lúcio might be *Overwatch* at its most ridiculous: a DJ/freedom fighter who deals death through sound rays and sick beats. We'd still rather spend an hour in his 'sick' company than listen to five more seconds of Tracer's accent.

Sharp shooter

Ker-razy characters are all good and well, but with ker-razy weapon loadouts there's a fine line between 'inspired' and 'obnoxious'. Logically, *Overwatch*'s gunfights should make about as much sense as a chocolate teapot. You've got transforming mechs going up against some dolt with a bow and arrow. We tried Hanzo, wielder of said bow, purely for completionism,

"The action's so well balanced, that reversing time doesn't feel like cheating"

until we surprised ourselves by how reluctant we were to give him up and preview other characters. Line up your shot, pull back, then release and the arrow whooshes past your ear and does an implausible amount of damage as it hits. Blizzard make the process feel so satisfying, you almost believe it when three well aimed pointy sticks bring down a killer robot. Giving everyone a strong sense of power smartly balances a wide range of fighters. After an hour with Hanzo, you almost understand how Hawkeye got into the Avengers. Almost.

Then again, why balance your game at all when you can have the punters do it for you? Your teams of six aren't restricted in choice - you can all play as tanks if you want, then switch out



Overwatch

→ for different heroes after you all die due to your terrible decision making.

Overwatch will warn you if you're picking too many snipers, or if your team lacks a healer, and so on. Advice can be ignored, but you've got no one to blame but yourself when you get demolished by an opposing group that actually listened to the game and – more crucially – each other. With every team-mate able to change character after each death (unlike *Battleborn*, which keeps you as one character for the whole level/match) you can alter the team's strategy on the fly. As a result, team chatter approaches *Rainbow Six Siege* levels of vital. We'd have never given up Hanzo, were it not for one of our team-mates yelling that we urgently needed a healer.

Medical malpractice

Luckily, Mercy, one of *Overwatch's* healer classes, makes the medical role far more entertaining than usual. Mercy flies around the battlefield, using a cooldown power to draw herself to any comrade in need of assistance. Her Caduceus staff heals allies, but it's only a split-second switch away from being a deadly Caduceus blaster. Whatever happened to 'do no harm', eh? Traditionally, the healer class is a weakling. Here we watch cowards running as an angel of death glides over her potential victims.

You'd expect a gravity-defying hero like Mercy to feel different to ground fighters, but everyone feels distinctive in motion. Tanks like Winston the ape lumber forward on all fours, while you can hear the constant clink of Roadhog's chain as he marches back into battle. McCree, a ponchoed Clint Eastwood-in-western-mode-type rolls around, dipping in and out of cover for quick revolver blasts. Different styles of motion might not sound like much, but it goes a long way in making these feel like unique fighters, not just 21 different character skins.

When everyone feels unique, there's far more incentive to try characters outside of your comfort zone. Each death is an opportunity to discover a hidden gem. Take Mei: she's a young lady in a parka, a nice disguise for someone with the powers of an ice God. Mei can freeze suckers with her Endothermic Blaster, fence foes in with ice walls and even self-heal by freezing herself in a block of ice. Mei

“Every death is an opportunity to discover a new hidden gem”

works because her blaster weapon has clear cause and effect – it's satisfying to freeze foes in place, especially when your team piles on the attacks while they can't escape.

Not all hit the spot. Lúcio is more lightweight, a wacky idea that has overtaken solid execution. This DJ uses a Sonic Amplifier (a ray gun) for attacks, with cooldown powers letting him play songs that heal allies or give him furious bursts of speed. It's a nice idea, but even Blizzard can't make a ray gun feel as satisfying as their projectile weapons. Or maybe it's a matter of adjustment. *Overwatch* offers such an instantly appealing roster, it's the exception, not the rule, when a fighter doesn't click right away.

Our first attempts at controlling Tracer, for example, resulted in messy dashes off the sides of the battlefield, while reversing time was doing more harm than good (time reversal sends you back physically to where you were a few seconds ago – so if that area's now full of turrets and bombs, it's not a smart move). But with perseverance she became a favourite, as we learnt to save dashes for crucial escapes to get the edge on enemies. Who knows? If we adapt this well to 21 heroes, maybe even Tracer's accent might grow on us? Then again, maybe this shooter is best enjoyed with your ears sawn off. **OXM**

WATCHING YOUR WALLET

Blizzard have confirmed that all future DLC for *Overwatch* comes at our perfect price: free. Devs have plans for future cast additions, but rather than ask for season pass money up front without any firm deets (mentioning no names, *cough* *Fallout 4* *cough*) DLC is available to all, keeping the game balanced for everyone no matter their budget.

BELOW “You best *Overwatch* your back!” we’ll say, until someone laughs or shoots us in the face.





041

ABOVE She can shoot out of her shield, but we can't shoot in? Life is unfair.

RIGHT We wear the same outfit as Junkrat, but we're not nearly as happy. What gives?



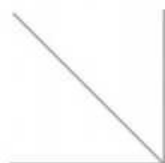
Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter

Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter

The master detective returns, now with added child labour

Matthew Castle

PUBLISHER BIGBEN DEVELOPER FROGWARES
FORMAT XBOX ONE DUE 10 JUNE



SHERLOL HOLMES

Punchier action is matched by funnier writing. Okay, Sherlock's no Seinfeld, but he does get himself into sillier jams. One scene sees him disguised as a Catholic priest, spooking an old lady with a fake exorcism – basically a bloke running around the outside of her house hitting it with a broom. Hey, we giggled.

Minutes into Holmes' latest case we find ourselves stuck up a chimney. Not as the famed consulting detective himself – his ego would never fit – but as streetwise scamp Wiggins, of the Baker Street Irregulars. He's the star of a sequence best described as *Metal Gear Squalid*: tailing a suspicious gent along mucky alleys, ducking behind barrels to avoid his gaze and taking dangerous shortcuts. This particular one has him dislodging obstructive soot from a flue as smoke gradually fills his lungs. You won't see that mini-game in *Rabbids* any time soon.

This harrowing event is part of *The Devil's Daughter's* shift towards a more kinetic Holmes game. The challenge with mystery stories is that the juicy bit traditionally comes at the end; fun as it is to watch Holmes potter around being faintly mardy to Watson, we are mostly biding our time until he weaves the facts into a gasp-inducing reveal. Frogwares nailed those conclusions in 2014's *Crimes and Punishments* – in which you entered Holmes' mind to stitch together neurons to stitch up crims – so now they're focusing on livening up the journey along the way.

Much of this work comes down to pace-changing mini-games, such as the chimney routine, or a balancing act controlled with gentle analogue

tweaks. A more substantial addition sees Holmes exploring sandbox-like areas. This isn't *GTA: Whitechapel*, but the network of streets is large enough to warrant mild navigational puzzling. One scene asks you to follow verbal directions to a pub; another has you finding a location by comparing a photo to your surroundings. Both trips show off streets teeming with virtual life and colourful set dressing.

Some of these asides can descend into gimmickry. At one point Wiggins is asked to hide from his quarry by playing a full-on shoeshine simulator. Being the pampered millennials we are we've no idea how to go about polishing a boot – there are, like, *five* different brushes involved – and so we fail the event. Luckily, it has no bearing on the plot because, as in *Crimes and Punishments*, all mini-games can be skipped. It can make the distractions feel disposable, but it's still nice to see Frogwares watching out for any bookworms who might just want to mainline the story.

Great minds

Some events you won't want to skip. We see the return of *Crimes and Punishments'* interactive timelines, again asking you to piece together a sequence of events. Previously used to visualise past crimes, here it helps Holmes plot how to escalate a mild-mannered card game into a fistfight to distract a nearby guard. Watching your cunning plan enacted with bursts of cinematic slow-mo and played to a synthy-sounding soundtrack, it can't help but channel the energy of the Guy Ritchie movies and the cool style of Cumberbatch's modern update.

Of course, everything leads to those classic deductions. Little has changed from before. You're still pairing up facts to fire up neurons and then webbing *those* ideas into logical conclusions. What's clever is the way the evidence (and the writers) keeps several suspects in play right up until the end – it requires a close reading of all the facts to favour one motive over another. The one wrinkle is that Sherlock can muddle his character assessments when he meets a new face. Here's hoping bad info doesn't send the case up in smoke – Wiggins is still in the chimney, after all. **OXM**



“What's clever is the way it keeps several suspects in play right up until the end”



043



ABOVE The power of Christ compels you to shave off that beard. What a heinous thing.

LEFT You'll have to pick between competing ideas to build a clear portrait of the case's suspects.



FAR LEFT London! Back when rents were affordable and everyone got murdered all the time. Wonderful.

roundup



THE NEW, THE WEIRD, AND THE GAMES THAT
ARE FRANKLY JUST LUCKY TO BE HERE **TOM STONE**



MANUAL SAMUEL



PUBLISHER CURVE DIGITAL **DEVELOPER**
PERFECTLY PARANORMAL **DUE** SUMMER

What if you had to manually control every part of your hero? You'll have to blink Samuel's eyelids, remember to keep breathing, make sure his spine stays up and somehow keep him alive for a whole day. Simple tasks like showering are now potentially lethal, and using a toilet gets truly grim. Imagine *Surgeon Simulator* for every part of life. Good luck with the stairs.

RAGING JUSTICE



PUBLISHER MAKINGAMES **DEVELOPER**
MAKINGAMES **DUE** 31 MAY

This is an old-school 2D co-op beat-'em-up, exactly the kind that used to drink spare change in '90s arcades (or so Grandad/Alex tells us). The demo we played had us strutting through a shady bar, using our fists to deliver the ol' *OXM* face-slam on drunken goons. Broad fun, especially if you long for a simpler time when this sort of thing was all the (Streets of) rage.

ATTACK ON TITAN



PUBLISHER KOEI TECMO **DEVELOPER** OMEGA
FORCE **DUE** 26 AUGUST

Oh no! Titans, giant half-naked humanoids, are attacking the city! Our only hope is a bunch of ambitious Japanese children who use ropes to propel themselves towards said monsters, and then brutally slice their limbs off. It's an open world game that'll follow the show's first season. Speaking as non-fans who don't understand what the hell's going on, it looks *brilliant*.

7 DAYS TO DIE



PUBLISHER TELLTALE GAMES **DEVELOPER** THE
FUN PIMPS **DUE** JUNE

This is an open world zombie survival game, but don't expect *Walking Dead*-style moral choices. Chatting's out and shooting's in, as is the looting, tower defence and deep crafting and farming systems that have already impressed an army of PC early access players. So, *Zombie Minecraft* then? Actually, *Minecraft*'s already got its own zombies, and they're terrifying enough.

AAERO



PUBLISHER MAD FELLOWS **DEVELOPER** MAD
FELLOWS **DUE** 2016

This spaceship rhythm shooter has you blasting enemies, flying through rings and following curly lines to keep the beat. Sound in theory, but twitchy controls sent us on a tuneless flight that reminded us why there's no sound in space. Hopefully this is an easy fix for an otherwise funky idea with a catchy soundtrack from artists including Flux Pavilion and Neosignal.

THE BANNER SAGA 2



PUBLISHER VERSUS EVIL **DEVELOPER** STOIC
DUE 2016

The sequel to the excellent Nordic strategy improves on the original's often repetitive combat. Expect new classes and abilities for fighters, plus a talent system that lets them take on new skills after you've maxed out their level. Harsh weather effects and more of the beautifully animated cutscenes aim to create a better paced, cinematic experience. We can't wait Thor this.

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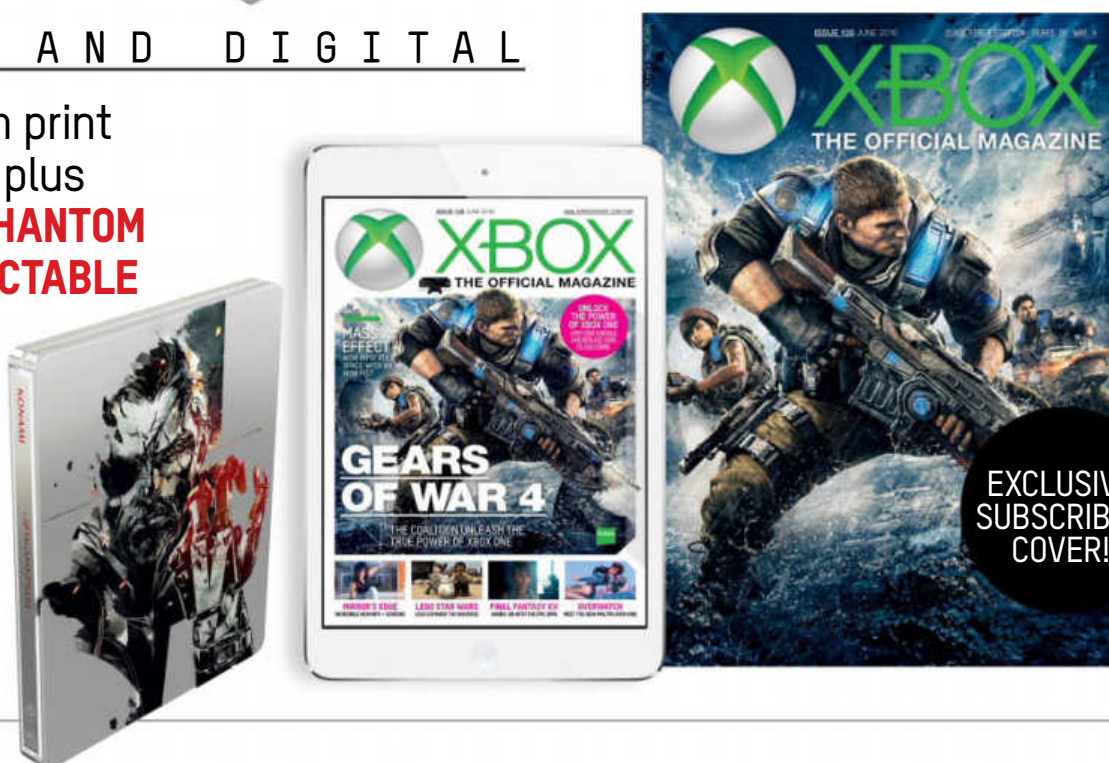


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GUNS. GUTS. GORE. GEARS



THE SERIES THAT SOLD MILLIONS OF
XBOX 360s HAS RETURNED, BUT CAN
GEARS OF WAR STILL CUT IT IN THE
AGE OF DESTINY AND TITANFALL? WE
GO HANDS-ON AND SPEAK TO THE
COALITION'S ROD FERGUSON

EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL



Gears of War creator Cliff Bleszinski is sitting *Gears 4* out



nce upon a time, everybody was obsessed with cover. Nowadays, we're all obsessed with getting away from it. Free-running and rapid vertical transitions have become the games industry's favourite party tricks – from jet-boosting through a Hydra barrage in Bungie's *Destiny*, to shining a wall with your soles in Respawn's *Titanfall*.

We love parkour as much as the next gymnast, but sometimes we miss simpler days when wars were won by tactical flanking actions and desperate clashes. Duels were more intimate. You could really taste the blood in the air. So it's great to learn that, while a thunderous change-up in terms of environment and enemy design, The Coalition's *Gears of War 4* is the same brutal yet involving trench warfare simulator at heart.

The events of the campaign (which supports split-screen and online co-op for two participants) span a single day, 25 years after Marcus Fenix and Delta Squad nuked the Locust at the climax of *Gears 3*. Hardly paradise to begin with, the planet Sera is now a world of savage opposites. On the one hand: the cityscapes of the autocratic Coalition of Organised Governments, where most of humanity lives. On the other: a wilderness racked by vicious storms and a new mutant menace.

The star is Marcus' buff blond son JD, who flees society after a classified but presumably heroic military indiscretion. He's joined by Kait Diaz, a daughter of the Outsider tribes who scrape a living beyond the COG walls, and Delmont Walker, a buddy from boot camp who couldn't be more of a tragic-victim-in-waiting if he were just three days from retirement. It's no

RIGHT The Combat Knife isn't as showy as a chainsaw, but it gets the gooey job done.

BELOW Charge up a Torque Bow bolt and it'll lodge in flesh, for an explosive instakill.

“THESE GUYS CAN DEVELOP IN THEIR OWN WAYS. THAT’S A LAYER WE HAVEN’T HAD”





051



parade of oddballs, but The Coalition's studio head Rod Fergusson maintains *Gears 4* will weave a more "nuanced" story than *Gears 1*, even if it draws on the same vintage archetypes.

Chip off the old block

"When I went to Epic, we had 18 months to get *Gears 1* out and we really had no background," he says. "You had to be able to describe everybody in two words. 'Over-enthusiastic athlete'? OK, that's good. That's a character, right?"

The point of a youthful cast, he adds, is simply that they can change. "Marcus was old at the beginning of *Gears 1*. I'm 47 – I'm the person I am. But these guys can go somewhere. When we look at where JD can go over the next 40 years, it's kind of anywhere we want. We're allowing for some blank pages, some unknowns. They're not already black-and-white, they haven't decided anything, they can develop in their own ways. I think that's a layer to our storytelling that we haven't had before."

KAIT DIAZ

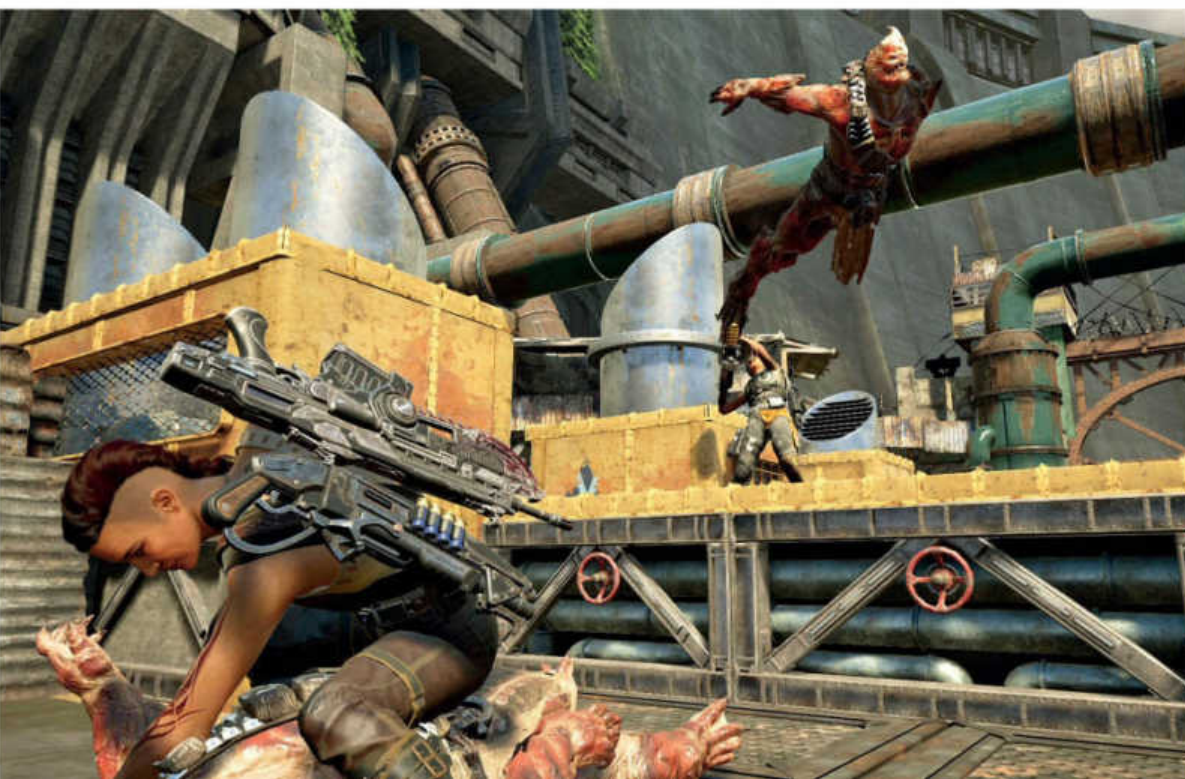
Bio Daughter of Reyna, leader of the Outsiders. No, not a rock band. Raised in the wastelands beyond COG rule. A formidable survivalist. Played by Laura Bailey, the voice of *Halo 5*'s Olympia Vale.

Likely to say: "Stop blocking my aim, idiot. Make yourself useful and lure out this Pouncer."
Unlikely to say: "Help!"



"FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS ARE GOING BACK TO THE '90s, COMING FULL CIRCLE"

052



JD

Bio The son of war hero Marcus Fenix and a lady who looks like *Gears 3*'s Anya Stroud. Ran away from home to join the army, then ran away from the army. Voiced by Liam McIntyre from *The Flash*.

Likely to say: "Unresolved father issues sting worse than bullets!"

Unlikely to say: "Let's just try talking to them next time."



A Gears of War Kinect spin-off was once in the works



Gears 4's combat has more layers, too, though there's a familiar double act at the core – the Lancer assault rifle, with its trademark chainsaw bayonet, versus the Gnasher shotgun, a weapon that has ended more forum friendships than all three Star Wars prequels combined. Perhaps wisely, The Coalition have left each gun more or less as it was at the close of *Gears 3*. The Lancer is for pinning enemies down, then chiselling away at hints of exposed legs or scalps until the owner collapses in a puff of viscera. The Gnasher, meanwhile, is for ambushing skirmishers at corners, dizzying duels in which players tumble around like capoeira dancers, and for shattering anybody who tries to put the Lancer's chainsaw to use at close range.

This angriest of munitions locker marriages aside, *Gears 4* also revives many of the old Gears power weapons alongside the trusty default smoke grenade and snub pistol sidearm. Among other favourites, there's the Torque Bow, with its armour-piercing explosive bolts, the Boomshot, with its a cing grenade rounds, the semi-automatic Hammerburst, and the Longshot, a scoped rifle built like a jousting lance that erases skulls with a toe-curling splat.

All this naturally speaks to The Coalition's love of the licence. It also reflects Fergusson's belief that much of what is termed "revolutionary" in shooter design is a return to roots. "I think first-person shooters right now are going back to the '90s," he says. "All of a sudden we went from super-realistic military games to wall-running and double-jumping. We're back to *Unreal Tournament* again. It's all coming full circle." *Gears 4* is

ABOVE The devs have yet to reveal any Swarm-specific gun types.

LEFT The landscape design is as in *Gears 1* – broken and desolate, yet majestic.

LEFT, BELOW Players may revive from KO after a period, so be sure to beat their faces in.

looking to its own past a little more openly, he says, though there are, of course, a few new tools and tricks.

Among the former, the Dropshot launcher spits up a drillhead that flies in a straight line till you release the trigger, whereupon it'll corkscrew earthward and explode. There's also the Buzzkill, which fires serrated discs that ricochet back and forth, dicing friend and foe alike. Among the new abilities is the option to reach across cover and seize an enemy by the scruff of the neck, yanking them onto the tip of your knife – a move The Coalition have added to discourage tedious exchanges of blindfire in close combat situations. In general, the designers have put a bit more spring in Gears of War's step. You can segue from a sprint to a cover-vault more smoothly, for example, and shoulder barge players to soften them up for a tasty melee finisher.

Terrain and terror

These additions are satisfying to exploit – time a Dropshot kill just right and it'll chew through the target's torso like a xenomorph born the wrong way up – but they're a little too incremental to exhilarate. So what else have The Coalition done to really set their first proper crack at the franchise apart? The answer is that the environment can no longer entirely be trusted. Gears of War has experimented with the idea of terrain deformation before, but never all that seriously – a smidgen of smashable brickwork here, the odd deployable barricade there. The fourth game shunts that concept to centre stage, up-ending much of what we know about cover systems in the process.

WOE UNTO DUDEBRO

Gears of War took videogame machismo to a new extreme, as anybody who's shaken hands with Augustus Cole can attest, and *Gears 4* has its share of bulging necks and *Expendables*-grade humour. Rod Fergusson insists, however, that there's more to the script than mucky jokes and bellowing. "I think it depends on how you define 'dudebro,' because everybody means it somewhat differently. Will we have banter and humour in our game? Yes. But is it people throwing down weights who look like they've been 'roided up? That's not a part of this at all."

He adds that Gears has always offered a range of character backgrounds, despite its preference for hulking Caucasian leads. "With JD being Marcus' son, our choices about who he's going to be are [down to] who Marcus is going to have sex with! We know half of him is going to be Caucasian. It's lineage more than anything, right? Historically, Gears has been very diverse, and we want the same thing here. We have Kait, who's mixed ethnicity, and Del, who's mixed ethnicity. We want to bring that nuance to it, not just a bunch of big college fratboys doing their thing."

The *Ultimate Edition* taught The Coalition the importance of 60fps

B

esides a new enemy faction (more about them shortly), the campaign now features 'windflares', symptoms of a Mother Nature run mad following all the Hammer of Dawn strikes and subterranean eruptions in previous games. There are four categories of storm. The first two are mainly there for atmosphere – you'll see trees thrash and particle effects kick up as the sky begins to lower, prompting uneasy memories of the Kryll clouds in *Gears of War 1*. But from stage three onwards, the wind is ferocious enough to change how you play.

It'll wear away certain terrain fixtures, for example, throwing together new routes or exposing you to fire. You might be able to blast an unstable object free to create a flying hazard, at the cost of removing a cover spot from the battlefield. The wind also affects projectile physics, so a grenade thrown upwind won't travel as far as one lobbed with the storm at your back. "We wanted to find a way to play with cover and make the battlefield feel more dynamic without breaking the core Gears experience," Fergusson notes.

Like all the best battlefield variables, category three windflares are equal parts inconvenience and opportunity. The weather is a fearsome adversary, but given a modicum of thought it can be your ally. Grenadier tucked snugly behind a building? Angle your Dropshot into the gale and it might whisk the floating drillhead right around the corner. Sniper trying to flank you? Shear away their knees with a rifle burst and watch as the sneaky devil makes a glorious ascent.

Stage four windflares, on the other hand, are all dark cloud and no silver lining. At this point you'll have to worry about lightning strikes, and the winds are boisterous enough to push

you off-course as you gallop between foxholes. It's a boss fight with the elements that you can't hope to win.

"A lot of prototyping and exploration went into the windflares," explains Fergusson. "There were definitely some things we tried that looked cool but didn't make it into the game, mainly because we were driving for a well-balanced experience. We want windflares to feel exciting and challenging, but need to ensure the player feels empowered." It's possible that the dynamic weather system will appear in multiplayer, too – you might recall that *Gears of War 3* featured a map with periodic visibility-killing sandstorms – but that's speculation for the moment. "We're exploring a number of ways to innovate and create a great multiplayer experience that's true to what fans expect."

Gears 4's principal antagonists, the Swarm, are trouble enough even when conditions are favourable. At first glance they're the Locust but mouldier – a procession of burly, lipless horrors armed with weapons seemingly cobbled together out of fungus, their origin a total mystery for the moment. If you had the chance to play *Gears 4*'s multiplayer beta you'll know that they often fight like the Locust, too. "What you see right now in

RIGHT If the topknot says "macchiato for one", the shotgun says "giblets for two".

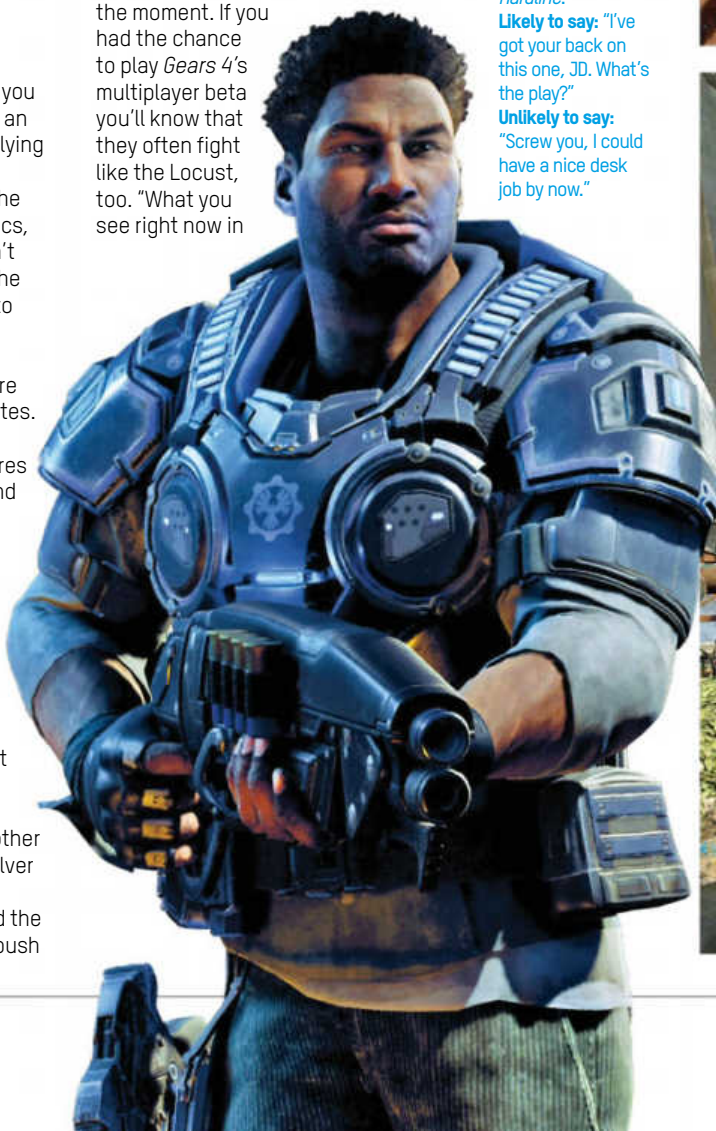
BELOW RIGHT The new Dam map's memorable fixtures include a Boomshot on an exposed walkway.

DEL WALKER

Bio A fellow orphan who fell in with JD at boarding school, then followed him into the COG army. Devoted to a fault. Voiced by Eugene Byrd, aka "Boomer" from *Battlefield Hardline*.

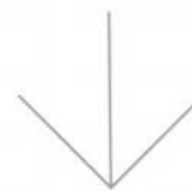
Likely to say: "I've got your back on this one, JD. What's the play?"

Unlikely to say: "Screw you, I could have a nice desk job by now."





“WE PLAY WITH COVER SO THE BATTLEFIELD FEELS MORE DYNAMIC”



GEARS 4'S MULTIPLAYER – EIGHT REASONS TO BE EXCITED

Microsoft haven't mentioned Horde Mode yet, but there's already much to like about *Gears of War 4*'s refitted multiplayer component. Here are the key takeaways.

1 THE NEW DODGEBALL MODE IS SWEET

Like team deathmatch, but you only get to respawn when an ally kills an enemy. This leads to great “clutch” moments as one hardy player brings their entire team back from the brink.

2 ACTIVE RELOADS ARE EASIER TO CALL

You can still double-tap reload for a damage buff, but a cooldown stops overuse. Active reload now buffs the whole magazine, so it's easier for opponents to guess how much souped-up ammo is left in the clip.

3 SKILL-BASED MATCHMAKING PREVENTS FRUSTRATION

Players are assigned to 16 or so skill ranks (including bronze, silver, gold, onyx, diamond and master) which decide who you're match-made with. It should lead to fairer battles.

4 ESCALATION MODE IS FOR PROS AND CROWDS

Comprising round-based matches of capture-the-ring, Escalation is designed for tournaments. The twist is that the losers get to pick the power weapons for the next round, handing them the advantage.

5 SYMMETRICAL MAP DESIGN EVENS THE ODDS

The Coalition want to make *Gears 4* an eSports hit, so the multiplayer maps are more regular in their layouts, with fewer crazy defensible nooks or overlooks that are closer to one side's spawn.

6 BETTER BOTS HELP NEWCOMERS MAKE HEADWAY

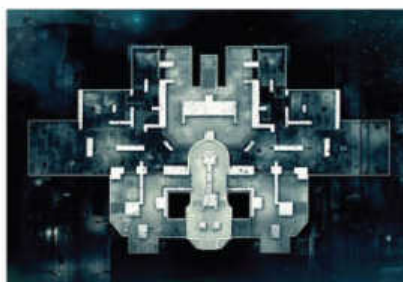
You can now play Co-op Versus against bots, earning multiplayer XP. Bots come in a range of flavours. Some will hunt you down like a dog. Others will hang back, awaiting an opening.

7 SPECTATOR OPTIONS HAVE SEEN HUGE EXPANSION

Expect dedicated spectator slots plus an interface that lets you track player HP and loadouts and switch to them quickly. Camera options include X-ray vision, free roam and CCTV-style angles.

8 ALL THE DLC MAPS ARE FREE

Gears 4 will launch with 10 maps, and The Coalition will release new ones for free, rotating them into and out of the line up. You'll be able to purchase maps to play them with your friends when out of the official rotation.



GEARS OF WAR 4

Gears 4's father-son narrative reflects Rod Fergusson's own childhood



→ the multiplayer is the 'mirror' faction of the enemy class," comments Chuck Osieja, The Coalition's creative director. "When we look at enemies [as designers], there are 'flushers' that get you out of cover, there are 'pinners' that keep you in cover and then there are 'mirrors' that act like the player acts.

"For Versus gametypes, obviously the class we need for that is the 'mirror' because they can be played by human opponents. They make up the bulk of the Gears experience anyway, because it's a cover-based shooter, but we throw in the other types of enemies for flavour in the campaign, and they show up in the PVP experiences later on."

If the Swarm rank-and-file are the usual suspects, the same can't be said for their young 'uns. Among the first enemies you'll meet are the Juvies, wiry infant Swarmers slathered in amniotic juices who sometimes burst from egg sacs when you stray too close. They fight like Wretches to begin with, slopping over obstacles to claw at your legs (the Gnasher, needless to say, is your best friend here). But leave them alive for long enough, and they'll harden and swell into mature Swarm infantry with fully developed trigger fingers.

Thus, each Jovie encounter has the potential to mushroom into a firefight – an unwelcome prospect after you've been driven out of hiding by the initial raking onslaught. You'll also have

to worry about Swarm enemies who scream, rousing nearby Juvies from their slumber. As with the windflares, there are many tactical opportunities tucked in among the hazards. You can shoot down Jovie eggs on the ceiling to create cover points, for example, though their gooey occupants may not take kindly to this.

Pounce and trounce

Then there are the Pouncers, squat yet agile chimera with dart-tipped tails and jaws that peel open in four directions. You might recall seeing one in Microsoft's E3 2015 *Gears of War 4* footage. Pouncers operate as both 'pinner' and 'flusher', flicking chitin at you when you advance and then lunging for your face when you take cover. Fortunately, they have at least one major weakness – a soft underbelly. The safer way of exposing it is to distract the Pouncer from one angle while comrades take aim from another, but if you're feeling more than usually courageous or silly, you could rev up your Lancer and try to disembowel the monster as it leaps.

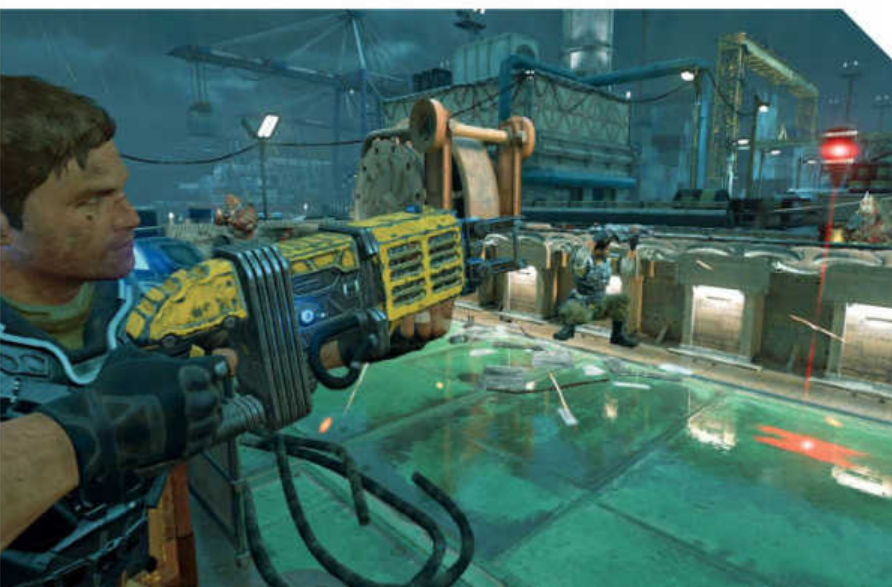
The Juvies aren't the only things designed to evolve. "I think *Gears of War* is a rich IP," Fergusson says when we pop the inevitable question about where Microsoft's multi-million-dollar investment might take the series after *Gears 4*. "We could probably do almost anything with it. I mean, that's the nice thing about having a franchise that doesn't take itself too

ABOVE Accurate and rangy, the Lancer is your standby weapon.

RIGHT Fergusson likens cover-to-cover movement to rock climbing.


RIGHT, BELOW What could possibly go wrong in 24 hours on Sera?

LEFT, BELOW The Dropshot leaves you exposed while guiding the charge.



UNREAL DEAL

The Coalition had to junk much of *Gears of War*'s old code to update it for Unreal Engine 4, but the payoffs are worth it: temporal anti-aliasing to avoid a common "warping" problem in fast-paced shooters where objects change faster than the frame-rate, and real-time screenspace reflections for bodies of water. The Coalition are aiming for a locked framerate of 60fps and intend to "push hard" on resolution. Another, less visible benefit of Unreal Engine 4 is that the tools allow faster prototyping of new ideas. "We don't go super-deep in on paper," says Fergusson. "We tend to go 'I have an idea!' 'OK, go and prototype it.' Blueprints allow any level or systems designer to go in and actually try out gameplay really quickly. And once we understand it, then we can give it to the engineers and turn it into code." The developers have road-tested over 100 multiplayer maps this way.



“PINNERS KEEP
YOU IN COVER,
FLUSHERS GET
YOU OUT, AND
THE MIRRORS
ACT LIKE THE
PLAYER ACTS”

RIGHT Who leads the Swarm? We can only wonder. And cower in fear. And run for cover.

seriously, it opens up opportunities to do different stuff, so yeah, I don't know! I'm struggling to come up with a game type that wouldn't work."

One archetype that might not fit is that of a massively multiplayer game, or even a relatively constrained 'shared-world' shooter in the vein of *Destiny*. In brief, the problem is who gets to play hero. "I think of *The Matrix* MMO where everybody wants to be Neo," says Fergusson. "I think that's a little bit harder for us, because *Gears of War* is a very character-driven game. So it would be 'I want to go into that universe, but I'm not going to be Marcus or another known character', and that's harder to pull off because the characters are so strong. Nothing's impossible – I'm just saying I think it's a hard journey, right?"


It's often argued that linear campaigns are at death's door, as publishers like Ubisoft continue to reap enormous returns from games that muddy the line between story and multiplayer. As with the recent hysteria for parkour movesets in shooters, Fergusson feels this is a

load of hot air. "Do I play open-world games? Sure. I'm Level 24 in *The Division* right now, and I play a shit-ton of *Destiny*. But do I also love to go in and play a story, have a story told to me? Absolutely. And so I don't think this is an outdated way of making or playing games. I think this way of playing games is evergreen, and we're trying to show solid execution with it."

What we've seen of *Gears of War 4* backs him up. When Microsoft acquired the licence from Epic in 2014, there was a slight whiff of defensiveness – after all, head of Xbox Phil Spencer has spoken frequently about the need to come up with a first-party equivalent for Sony's third-person Uncharted franchise, telling *OXM* baldly in a recent issue that "we don't really have a good third-person shooter". But the new *Gears of War* isn't just Microsoft's answer to Uncharted. It's shaping up to be a smart, sinewy balance of tradition and ingenuity – a sequel that has yet to seriously surprise us but clearly has its eyes on the horizon. The crimson omens are good. **OXM**



057



RIGHT After a decade in EA's corporate machine, Ward formed Three Fields in an attempt to get back to the heart of game making.

Burnout was originally codenamed 'Shiny Red Car'

Alex Ward Burning on



OXM SPEAK TO THE CREATIVE
DIRECTOR BEHIND THE ACCLAIMED
BURNOUT GAMES - THE SERIES THAT
DIDN'T JUST MAKE CRASHING FUN,
IT MADE IT ESSENTIAL **ALEX DALE**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN NIXON



059



Barack Obama used the billboards in *Burnout Paradise* to advertise his presidential campaign

W

hen life gives Alex Ward lemons, he makes it rain lemon juice. As the co-founder of Criterion Games, he made his living from destruction – whether it be beautiful cars in *Burnout*, or beautiful backdrops in *Black*. Now the founder of start-up company Three Fields Entertainment, he's destroying beautiful homes in *Dangerous Golf*. OXM caught up with him in his new office in Petersfield, Hampshire (before he trashes the place) to reminisce about the history of his most famous creation...

What's interesting to me about the Burnout series is that every game is very different to the last. In an industry where identical sequels are commonplace, why did Criterion insist on making such sweeping changes to a winning formula?

The honest answer there is that in 1996 on New Year's Day I went to London to see a documentary about John Lennon, called *Imagine*. It planted a few seeds in my mind, one of which was that Lennon was being interviewed later on in his career, and he was looking back on The Beatles records. We used this line a lot at Criterion but this is honestly where it came from – he said every Beatles record was a reflection of who they were at the time. There was a core team of about five or six who worked on Burnout throughout, but there were also a lot of people coming in and out as the team's size fluctuated. So each game was a reflection of who we were at that time. With each of the games we had to push ourselves to be different. And the other main part of the answer is that doing the same thing again as a team is not interesting. I always wanted it to be a series that you'd look back on and people would argue which one was the best one, because they all had their strengths and weaknesses.

I always find it interesting when music sites interview bands and they ask them what their favourite record is and it's always off-kilter with what fans might think...

It's always some obscure B-side. Bands – the ones they like to play are the ones that they want to sing, like their new stuff. Or they want to sing something that was lesser-known but that they personally enjoy, but maybe wasn't as commercially successful. Or they want to sing a B-side.

So my question is, what personally is your favourite Burnout game?

Well the easy answer there is *Burnout 3: Takedown* every time. It was genuinely exciting to do. The tech was solid, we were ahead in the development all the time so that meant for all the external stuff we had to do, we always had great software and we knew we could win. We were able just to play down a winning hand every time and people got very excited. It was a pleasure to show it off. I'm not sure everybody at the time was sure of what was going into it, particularly takedowns. I remember when we were talking about how we were going to make takedowns better before we had arrived at stopping the action and seeing the car go behind you, the UI programmer at the time thought there was too much on the hood, like 'why are we doing this'? But takedowns were kind of in. *Burnout 3* was the one I look back and I think I'm most happy with it. I'm happiest with it because there's nothing there that pains me.

***Burnout 3* was the tipping point where the series got bolder, brasher and more aggressive. Was it reflective of where you were as a studio at the time?**

That was a time period where we were really influenced by SSX. In that series you can power the character up and then when you go back to the start with the character fully charged it's a different game. That was

quite mind-blowing. SSX was a bold and vibrant game made by a brilliant creative director called Steven Rechtschaffner, who was a *Burnout 2* fan. He came to visit us and gave us the wonderful advice that using boost in *Burnout 3* should be like snorting a huge bowl of cocaine. SSX was big and brash, and when you got into the zone, with Run DMC thumping, it was very clear.

It was around this time that Burnout made the shift from in-house audio to licensed tracks. That, alongside the roadside advertising, left many fans feeling EA were stomping all over your creative vision...

Burnout 3 was our nod to SSX, which is why we use DJ Atomika in the later games. Our in-house audio team recorded music that went louder when you boosted, but when we signed to Electronic Arts all of a sudden they'd send you a catalogue and you could pick real songs yourself. Given the chance, ask any developer in the world, and if you can put real music in your game you probably would. As for billboards, well, we had some billboards we needed to design, which takes a bit of time and we had to think them all up. So when we talked to the EA guys and said 'well, can we advertise FIFA', then they go, 'yeah, sure, we'll send you the artwork', sorted. So we advertised FIFA, Battlefield and I think Medal of Honor was in there as well. Well, why wouldn't we? To us it was a real game, it became a real advert, it was work we didn't have to do so that's why we did it. There was nobody in the background going, 'you've got to do this'. We were pretty much left alone while we were making *Burnout 3*.

The flip side of the original question is, which Burnout game do you feel you were less happy with, or maybe would have approached in a different way?

I'd say the art direction in *Revenge*. Looking back, I'd probably wish to do it differently. I say the art direction in the sense that the game's very brown and quite a bit dayglow, and I think that *Burnout 3* was a bright sunny day. Going forward to *Revenge*, we were searching for what's called in the trade an 'ownable look', so you could look at the screenshot and know what it is. *Mirror's Edge* is a good example of that – if you look at a picture it's got a very ownable look.

Revenge was a name that we didn't gel with because we wanted to call it *Burnout 4* and that's where we were pushed to think up a title. It was going to be called *Rush Hour Revenge*, and then it got shortened to *Revenge*. So I think about the art direction,





LEFT The Three Fields team, with co-founders Ward and Fiona Sperry (plus mascot Piper) front and centre.





To promote *Burnout 2*, publisher Acclaim offered to reimburse real-life speeding tickets. The UK government applied the brakes

→ when I go back and boot *Revenge* up, I do like the tracks and I do like how giddy and over the top it is, but I do think it's a bit brown and a bit yellow.

That was very much the style of the mid-noughties, though.

The start of the piss filter, I think is what it's called, but that's just as lighting tech evolved. You can do more clever things with it. We didn't really think about it on *Burnout 1*, 2 or 3 because the game was just going to run at 60 frames so you can't really do any clever lighting.

That brings us on to the open world *Burnout Paradise*, a game that's completely ahead of its time and continues to influence the way racing games are structured today.

The big game that influenced me from an open world point of view was Pandemic's *Mercenaries*. A brown-looking game, but it did it maybe better than *Revenge*.

"Each game was a reflection of who we were right then. We had to push ourselves to be different each time"

Mercenaries was probably more influential to me than Grand Theft Auto ever was. It was a very ambitious project, and not without its problems. A lot of people couldn't see why we'd change and go to open world – it's easier to control the racing experience on closed tracks that are all sealed in. The risk is that you can't make the race as good in an open city because people can get lost. In Pixar terms, we ran up a lot of hills – like trying to teach AI how to drive in an open world environment. Our mantra was that it had to be a game where you can take your time, where you're the master of your domain. It had to be fun to drive around the world and explore – that's why we started on the whole collectable thing. Can you go and find all the billboards? Can you go anywhere you can see a gate? What are the collectables? That was the start, that was new for us in going

round. It should just be fun to drive round the world so then it took an incredibly long time to get AI stood up and working so you could make a race.

***Paradise* blazed a trail for today's trend for 'games as a service', with its deluge of free updates that completely transformed *Paradise City*...**

Yeah, it was driven by us because we worked in a company that published a lot of hit games. At that time there was a lot of talk in the trade about the threat of used games, in the sense that you'd release a game and then the consumer would play it for a few weeks, complete the game, take it back to the shop, trade it in and get the next game. We figured that you wouldn't trade a game if you knew there was something else coming down the line. We were the first full-priced game that was a digital game so we pioneered that, and we were always asking questions of our world.

I think some of the car manufacturers don't particularly like to see the crashing but that's what you're seeing now with Forza, so what we did was okay.

How did you come to move from *Burnout* to *Need for Speed*? There was a sense your *Need for Speed* games were effectively *Burnout* games in a corporate suit.

We'd just finished *Paradise* and we were looking what to do next. The Need for Speed guys, who always sold more than us, I think they put a game out [*Need for Speed: Undercover*] and it got 3/10 in *Edge*, and I remember thinking that's not right. So I think I literally called the head of EA publishing on his way to work and said that he should give it to us. He said okay. It's a higher profile and our job there was to try and bring it back to life, to revitalise it after a game that hadn't been well-received, critically or commercially.

We did about six months of failed starts on a concept called *Need for Speed: Millionaire*, which was going to be an online-only game and, of course, even probably now, people weren't too popular on making a game that was online-only. It was going to be like a *Top Gear* game, where you won the lottery at the start of the game and you and your friends got access to all the world's best cars and you can go off and have some adventures.

Trying to build that and communicate that to a team of people [was not easy] – they were a bit confused by that, so after about six months we abandoned it for something more straightforward. I was into Need for Speed on the 3DO, so I figured we'd have a crack at revisiting an old game, *Hot Pursuit*, with its focus on police chases. There's a lot of *Burnout* in there and it would have to be, it was made by the *Burnout* team. It's like asking *Top Gear* to do an episode of *Downton Abbey* – it's probably going to have a bit of *Top Gear* in it in period costume.

Would you consider revisiting the racing genre in the future?

We think about it a bit differently now. I mean, what we can do today on today's tools and hardware would be quite interesting, but Three Fields Entertainment is only starting out – we still have to get *Dangerous Golf* done. If we can raise enough money to make a spiritual successor to *Burnout* – and we think that'll be our third game – I could definitely see us having a crack at an open world game. **OXM**

Next month, we chat to ex-Rare legend and voice of Banjo and Kazooie, Chris Sutherland

magic moments

2002

BURNOUT

Arriving out of nowhere, the series debut revolved around a simple but addictive risk versus reward dynamic: drive dangerously, earn boost.

2004

BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN

As before, but *Takedown* included an even juicier way to replenish the boost bar – shunt the opposition sideways into a pillar.

2005

BURNOUT REVENGE

As before, but 2005's *Revenge* included an even juicier way to gain boost – plough through cars and rear-end rivals into the nearest lamppost.



OXM INVESTIGATES

Can you

One man. One console. 31 days. With no access to tech other

live on

than an Xbox One, can our writer keep himself entertained,

Xbox

fed and somehow still employed? **TOM STONE**

One?

Bonus survival tip: Every copy of *OXM* has a secret edible bacon page. This is a fact



Bonus survival tip: Eating meals in the shower saves time on washing up

T

hey call Xbox One the all-in-one entertainment system, but that can't possibly be true, right? In an age where there's a gadget to cover any human need – you can get a trouser belt that tells you when you're getting fat – the idea of a machine that condenses 'all' needs into a single box would be a godsend. I raise this point to the team and am soon challenged to live an entire month on Xbox One. No phone. No PC. I'm not even meant to leave my home. Can a human possibly survive on Xbox alone?

Day 1 I survey the options available to me. I have a Domino's Pizza app to keep me fed. I have Xbox Fitness to keep me in peak physical condition without having to set foot near a gym. As for entertainment – ha! This is the Xbox One, the unstoppable media machine that has access to games, movies and TV shows. I'll be amazed if I ever feel boredom again. This month trapped indoors is going to be the best experience of my life.

Day 2 You don't become the healthiest member of Team OXM by just idly watching Matthew and Alex drink gravy all day. I plan to keep my health on the level by using Xbox Fitness. It's the app icon with the unsmiling goateed man staring at you. I try not to get too intimidated and open it.

Mr Goatee McNosmiles is just the start, as even the names of these workouts are intimidating. Extreme Combat. Knockout Body. One is just called *Insanity*. Even calm, lovely yoga has been pumped with adrenaline, here called Yoga Inferno. I try a six-minute workout that gives me a taste of everything. A one-star taste, as that's what I score in all disciplines from combat to jumping jacks. Well, except the Disco Warmup, where I nail a five-star ranking. I was born to dance. After six minutes, I'm told I've burned a whopping 39 calories. Result.

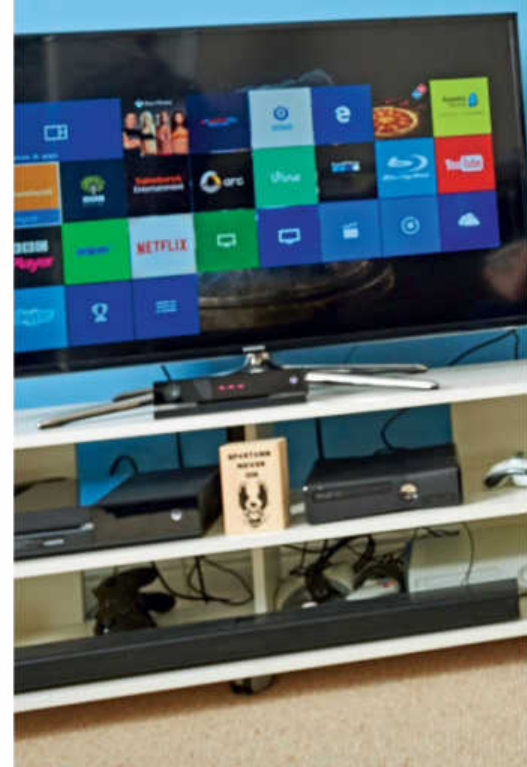
All about that pizza base

Day 3 With those 39 calories in my pocket and house supplies running out, I start to plan my weekly shop. I open the Domino's Pizza app, put in my postcode, then peruse a wall of meat 'n' sauce discs – it's like food Netflix. I also buy ice cream (breakfast) to go with the pizzas (lunch, dinner, brunch, snacktime, second breakfast) and several bottles of cola (mouthwash).

Several doctors/my mum warn me this is not sensible for my health, but they're just jealous of my delicious new life. With Xbox Fitness on my side, if anything, I am going to *lose* weight. I make sure to wash my clothes at higher heats so they shrink to fit my rake-thin frame. Good to be prepared.

Day 4 After a few days, I start to crave the great outdoors. The GoPro Channel

RIGHT Evidence Tom binned off all his other tech. There's no way he'll be able to get that back!



is a collection of video clips, shot using head-mounted cams, that cover everything from extreme snowboarding to extreme watching-a-cat-ride-a-skateboard. Stand close to the TV and it feels like you're really there. Suddenly I'm surfing in Hawaii, driving a Formula 1 car and running alongside the beasts of the jungle. Why did I bother to leave the house before this challenge?

Day 5 Work beckons. Using Skype, I conference call in with Matthew and Alex for our issue planning meeting. I explain that since I'm stuck at home, I probably shouldn't do any writing this issue. They strongly – some might say *violently* – disagree. So I pretend I can't hear them by making crackling noises with my mouth and claim they are breaking up. They remind me that Skype is a video call, and a startlingly clear one at that. Kinect has stitched me right up.

Eventually I start pitching some brilliant features ('Is Xbox One more fun on a luxury cruise? We sent Tom to find out!') but a few minutes into explaining why they should pay for first class and let me be ship's captain, something feels off. Squinting at the screen,



ABOVE Is this Netflix or the Domino's app? I'll have a 13-inch House of Cards, please.



“Xbox Fitness can monitor your heartbeat. I no longer seem to have one. This doesn’t sound too healthy”

I realise Matthew and Alex have snuck off to play *Gears 4*. One of the benefits of living on Xbox One is that you can stalk your bosses through the friend list. I send a message to complain. They change their privacy settings.

Food, glorious food

Day 8 I’m starting to wonder if my all-pizza diet is such a good idea. Xbox Fitness can monitor your heartbeat. I no longer have one. That doesn’t sound healthy. With three weeks still to go, it’s time to explore other culinary options. Exploring the app store, I discover that the supermarket Sainsbury’s have an app, Sainsbury’s Entertainment. My stomach is literally screaming with joy.

Oddly, the homepage for Sainsbury’s Entertainment just has movies and TV shows,

so I use the search bar and type in ‘food’. The only result is a 1992 movie called *Gas Food Lodging*. Desperate for grub, I pay up and download it. I’m about 90 minutes through the movie when I start to suspect this isn’t going to help me get any food. At least the story of two sisters growing up in small town America has warmed my heart. Although, that warm heart could be another symptom of eating nothing but pizza for a week.

Day 9 Obviously I have millions of friends. Unfortunately, none of my (definitely real) friends are on Xbox One. If I have any hope of someone sending me non-pizza food, I need new friends, fast. I download *Overdog*, an app with an idea as nice as its name is horrible. You create a profile, adding the games you play and films you like. Then *Overdog*



SURVIVAL TOOLS – CHATPAD

For extra credit, Matthew suggested I write this whole feature using a normal Xbox One controller. So I found the Chatpad incredibly useful for speedily bashing out my resignation letter. The Chatpad is a well made piece of kit, with keys that are decent-sized for fat fingers and click pleasantly without feeling sticky. There are also two buttons you can allocate yourself, making the apps you use most potentially just a button tap away. I set mine to *Xbox Fitness* and the other to the *Domino’s Pizza* app, then endlessly tapped between the two options, trying not to succumb to either. Perhaps you’ll find a more practical use than that.

It’s also not just for people who want to type faster. I’d highly recommend it for anyone who uses the screenshot and game capture functions but is sick of constantly quitting out of their game by accident. Here a tap of the X1 button takes a screenshot, while the X2 button records your game-clip, saving you from clumsily double-tapping face buttons or screaming “Xbox Record that!” at your Kinect. If rumours of an updated Xbox One turn out to be true, then I want these buttons to be on the next controller as standard.

A KEY ACCESSORY





SURVIVAL TOOLS – SMARTGLASS

Mixing fancy tablet tech with consoles has never really been a hit with customers – just ask anyone who works at Nintendo. After messing around with Smartglass, I can see more of the benefits. It gets a bonus point for being easy to set up: download the app, put in your Live login details and you'll be using your touchscreen device as an Xbox One controller in no time. But isn't that kind of the problem – why swap a pad for something... weirder?

Touch control isn't superior to an Xbox One pad, especially when you're navigating a user interface that wasn't updated with Smartglass controls in mind. It can let you check in on Achievements, messages and what friends are doing on Xbox while you're out. So you can check your Gamerscore while on the bus. Hint: it won't have changed unless a brazen burglar has been playing *Forza* while you're out and about.

But what Smartglass does solve is the perennial problem of the virtual keyboard. Tired of painstakingly picking over that sea of tiny letters? It's as easy as tapping in a text message on Smartglass (and doesn't add the heft of the Chatpad to the controller). A very sensible add-on for the unsensible job of typing an entire magazine feature into *Microsoft Edge*.

TOUCHY SUBJECT



“Stand eye-wateringly close to the screen and it feels like you’re really there. Suddenly I am surfing in Hawaii”

Bonus survival tip: Stale pizza and cardboard taste almost identical, so just eat the boxes

→ matches you up with people who share similar interests. Games are a touchy subject for me right now, considering that my lack of submitted work this month could have me fired from OXM any day. So I add *Gas Film Lodging*, the only film I've ever seen.

I don't find anyone else who shares my love of the 1992 coming-of-age drama. Pfft, who needs friends anyway, when you've got boxes of stale pizza and a review deadline that's impossible to meet? Help.

Aprendiendo español

Day 10 I decide to be more proactive in my hunt for friends and go to a place famed for its hospitality, *Call of Duty: Black Ops III*. I soon team up with a band of murderous Spanish players, but they don't speak enough English to understand my pleas for food over Xbox Live. Luckily, there's an app for that. *Rosetta Stone* is a language-learning app that would have me speaking Spanish in no time. I don't need to be fluent. I just want to learn the words for 'hello', 'friend' and 'Tom is starving to death, please send delicious ham'.

I start on a static picture of an airport, full of people and objects that can be interacted with. Selecting an object lets me hear the word for it in Spanish. I select a pair of jeans lying on the ground outside an airport (apparently public nudity isn't as big a deal in Spain), and learn 'los jeans'. After pressing repeat translation (los jeans) a few thousand times to sink it in, I realised this wasn't going to help me ask for food. Te maldigo los jeans!

I select a cartoon of a person, and they leave their animated realm, terrifyingly transforming into a flesh-and-blood human. They start talking to me and then give a selection of words and letters to build a response from. It gives you a ridiculously limited phrasebook (a lot of the learning is through trial and error), and helps you by making these Spaniards the most patient people in the world, grinning happily at me for multiple hours as I try to remember 'take me to the hotel'. It's a great app, one that soon teaches me 'la comida' – food! Armed with two Spanish words, I close the app, proud of five days well spent.

I just don't get it. I send my Spanish friends at least 60 messages begging 'la comida'. But instead of receiving any food, I receive a warning from Xbox Live and my so-called 'friends' block me. My stomach howls with despair. Te maldigo *Rosetta Stone*.

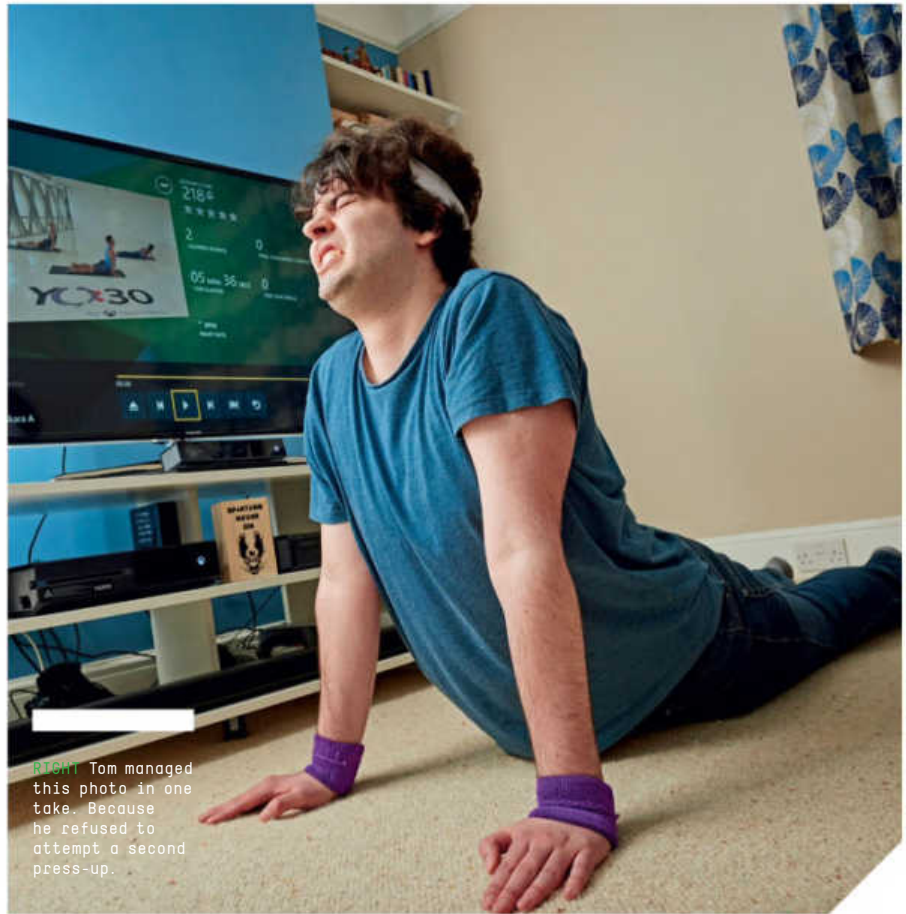
Day 11 Desperate times call for desperate measures. I download the *Twitch* app, and try to hijack a conversation in a chatroom to see if I can get someone to send me some food:

HungryTom: Hey guys!

Spongebob59: sup

DunkmeisterMaseeve: Whatever

HungryTom: Could anyone send me some food?



RIGHT Tom managed this photo in one take. Because he refused to attempt a second press-up.

Spongebob59: wot

DunkmeisterMaseeve: ???

HungryTom: You know, since I can't leave the house. Gee, sure does suck being trapped inside! Amirite?

Spongebob59: trapped?

Dunkmeister: !!!

HungryTom: You know. Not being allowed to go out, having to live through the Xbox, running out of food, wishing you'd paid the water bill before taking on this challenge.

Spongebob59: is someone imprisoning you?

Dunkmeister: I'm calling the police.

That could've gone better. Good thing this ridiculous challenge is only until the end of April, because in May I might need to be in court for wasting police time.

All work and no play

Day 12 Without access to my computer, I haven't submitted any writing to the mag. My only hope is somehow getting my *Dark Souls III* review through the Xbox and into the office. My solution lies in the game – you can leave notes for other heroes online, warning of dangers ahead. All I have to do is leave 1,500 words worth of notes. Job done.

I now go into the *Dark Souls III* game hub and browse my shares and captures. Then

I select Share and upload my beautiful creations to Twitter, making sure to tag my boss in every tweet. Unfortunately, the limited amount of words allowed in *Dark Souls III*'s notes makes my review tricky. I have to take out my descriptions of the combat, graphics, level design, gameplay, whether it was worth playing and what the game was called. Apart from that, though, I think the review went pretty well.

Day 16 Time to treat myself to some R&R. Between Amazon Video, Netflix and Now TV, I am spoilt for choice for streaming services on Xbox One. At least I would be, had I not blown all my streaming budget on pizza. Luckily there is one streaming service that is completely free. You don't even need to sign up. So what's the catch, Popcornflix?

There is no catch, so long as you have no taste. Popcornflix has a wide library of movies I'd never heard of, with titles including *Who's Your Monkey*, *Sherlock Bones: Ace Detective* (about a detective that's also a dog), *Santa with Muscles*, *Dusting Cliff 7*, *The Prince of Kissing* and *Yonkers Joe*. How can a movie called *Yonkers Joe* not be brilliant? That's what they should've called *Citizen Kane*.

Day 18 Having confirmed that cinema is dead, I start my next fool-proof scheme to get food. Back to Xbox Live, this time with

Bonus survival tip: Dogs lick themselves clean. What's stopping you?

→ a more communal experience. *Rainbow Six Siege* is an excellent game about saving a hostage who's been trapped in a building by a maniac. It's relatable too. It relies on good communication and listening to your team-mates, which is why I use my headset to beg my fellow counter-terrorists for grub.

After I get us murdered for the 14th time, I ask my team-mates to mail me food. In exchange, I promise not to play *Rainbow Six Siege* again. They refuse on the grounds that parcels are expensive to post. I suggest they find foods that would comfortably fit inside a cheap envelope. How about ham or lasagne sheets? With just ten days left, I could easily ration these treasures. Sadly, no one bites – least of all me.

Day 21 My stomach skips a beat (my heart is long out of the picture) when I see an app called *Crunchyroll*. Crunchy rolls! Finally I'd be free of pizza. But it turns out that *Crunchyroll* is actually a streaming app for anime and Japanese television. It has a vast library you can watch for free, so long as you don't mind putting up with odd ads.

One second I'm being advertised a show about flying schoolgirls, then one with glamorous shots of food. Okay, I used to enjoy food, I'm sort of getting into the groove with this and – oh lord, why is no one

wearing clothes now? Anime's confusing at the best of times, so watching quick-cut trailers for multiple shows is like being beaten to death by a screaming rainbow.

I also discover my new favourite drama, *Mr Nietzsche in the Convenience Store*. It's about a man dubbed Mr Nietzsche, who works in a... Look, it's too complicated to sum up here. Just download *Crunchyroll* and watch it yourself. You won't be disappointed.

Unless you were counting on the app to deliver food as much as I was.

Day 23 The boss messages me constructive feedback of my *Dark Souls III* review: "Redo it or you're fired." I'm all out of options, so it is clearly time to look for a new career. I decide to enrol at the Khan Academy. This app has lots of educational (boo!) and free (yay!) programmes designed to teach you maths, chemistry

and how your body works. After two weeks of pizza, I think it might be useful to swot up on health and medicine to see if I am going to die. Alas, learning about viruses and disease makes me terrified of germs and I turn into a paranoid wreck and refuse to leave the house. I receive an angry message from the boss reminding me I'm not allowed to leave anyway. Phew!

Day 25 Having expelled myself from the Khan Academy, I start formulating a new

scheme. I decide to once again enroll in *Rosetta Stone*. Surely if I learn a foreign tongue I could apply to work for OXM's Brazilian edition, *Revista Oficial Xbox*. It'd be tough to adjust to decent weather and new colleagues, but at least I wouldn't look like a terrifying ghost boy in my next photoshoot.

The final straight

Day 30 With one day to go until my release, I decide to finally try out the on-console web browser *Microsoft Edge*. You can't eat edges, so I hadn't felt compelled to try it out before. It is something of a revelation. It works with my Outlook account, which, paired with a Chatpad or SmartGlass add-on, lets me type my 1,500 words into *Word Online* and zap them to my editor. That's one crisis averted.

It also means I can buy actual food, using online deliveries, and hop on to IMDB to see if *Santa with Muscles* was a real film or just a pepperoni-induced fever dream. Shame I discovered this so late in the challenge, but at least my job is secure and I don't die of starvation. That's a double win. Is it a sound replacement for a traditional PC or tablet? I wouldn't recommend throwing those away just yet. But you might be surprised by how versatile that browser is. Turns out Microsoft know a thing or two about these things.

Day 31 I emerge, blinking, into the light. A whole month survived on pizza, Xbox and no physical human contact. I do not recommend you follow in my footsteps, but do dig a little deeper into the box on the TV. It might not be a replacement for every gadget, but you'll be surprised by what it can handle. **OXM**



SURVIVAL TOOLS – THE BEST (AND WORST) SOFTWARE



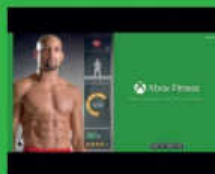
POPCORNFLEX

A grim selection of movies so cheap and nasty they look like they're about to swipe your wallet. This Netflix of Z-grade cinema will be useful next time someone claims that videogames aren't art. Compared to what, *Yonkers Joe*?



CRUNCHYROLL

I laughed smugly at *Crunchyroll*'s selection of weird anime. But have I directed a masterpiece as good as *Akira*? Or created an excellent streaming service that gets new anime to you an hour after it's broadcast in Japan? I have not.



XBOX FITNESS

The intense trainers scared me into never exercising again. But if you're made of stronger stuff and want to be even stronger, *Xbox Fitness* is a generous Gold membership extra with high production values and makes good use of the Kinect.



KHAN ACADEMY

Apparently meant for children, but speaking as a stupid adult, I found *Khan Academy*'s educational tools very useful too. They even have some classes that go behind the scenes at Pixar Studios, a must for animation fans of any age.



ROSETTA STONE

Blew a Spanish friend's mind recently when I pronounced 'los jeans' correctly and almost got the word for 'food' right too. Full of clever games and interactive conversations to help you learn, the *Rosetta Stone* app is certainly très bien! Wait...

“Learning so much about viruses and disease makes me terrified of germs and I turn into a paranoid wreck”



→ Got something you want us to investigate? Tell us at oxm@futurenet.com

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BIGGEST HITTERS OF 2016 ”

GamesMaster



REVIEWS

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Definitive reviews for May



Resi 6 will be followed by Resi 4 and Resi 5 in the months to come. How do you like dem Evils?

The squirrels are waking, green leaves are returning to the treetops and once again the air is alive with the song of birds. That's right, spring is here, and for gamers, that only means one thing – er, the release schedule is looking as shrivelled and sad as last month's snowman. But hey, the breathing room just gives us an opportunity to shine a light on some cult classics, past and present, that would get unfairly overlooked in busier months. For 'past', read **Resident Evil 6** (p84), originally released on Xbox 360 in 2012 and now given a fresh lick o' paint for Xbox One. It's one of the weirder offerings in Capcom's survival horror series, with an 'everything but the kitchen sink' approach which sees four very different storylines entwine around each other. Xbox One launch title **Killer Instinct** (p80) is another underrated gem receiving a second bite of the cherry, in the form of a third season which sees everyone from *Battletoads*' Rash to *Halo 2*'s Arbiter join the fracas. But there's no disputing the game of the moment: **Dark Souls III** (p76) sees the notoriously punishing action RPG series return to its genre-defining best after the minor stumble of *Dark Souls II*. It's a glorious fusion of rewarding combat, outstanding online integration and lore-rich backstory. And finally, er, anyone for **MXGP 2** (p86)? Told you it was a lean month.



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080



084



086



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Dark Souls III

GOODBYE FOREVER, YOU MAGNIFICENT JERK **TOM STONE**



077

Here's your quote for the box: *Dark Souls III* ruins lives. Our April would've been less stressful had we just stopped

playing. So why couldn't we quit? Why were we still fighting an impossible battle with the Dancer of the Boreal Valley that we'd proven over and over we just weren't capable of winning? Maybe if we could've found just one badly designed section, one source of cheap deaths, one crucial flaw to latch onto... But we never had a hope.

Infinitely more beautiful than our charred flesh form, the Dancer glides and swoops around us, a flaming sword in one hand, an instakill grab attack frequently delivered with the other. We cower behind a shield too feeble to block her blade as death follows death. "How was your day?" our housemates chirpily inquire, getting only a grunt in reply. They can't understand. To them we just

ABOVE Expect to share the fate of Mr Red a lot. Mr Blue? Yeah, you wish.

BELOW Pick your armour carefully. If you're weedy, heavy gear will reduce speed.



"play games all day" while they work their real jobs down sewage mines or something. They can't relate to this digital hell. The Dancer had become what Ornstein and Smough were to us in the first game, or The Pursuer in its sequel. We had hit the Souls 'wall'.

Bar brawling

You'll hit it, too, even using every trick mastered in previous Souls. Combat's relatively unchanged, still a masterful balancing act of attack and defence. It's all about watching your stamina bar, which you'll rely on for defence, sprinting and attacks. Once that bar depletes, your health is up for stabs. So you keep your shield up, saving stamina for perfectly timed sword slashes. Or lance pokes. Or spell strikes. Or lowering the shield and two-handing your weapon (gambling your life on your ability to dodge roll).

Indeed, one of the joys of this series is finding the combat style that suits you, and it's now far easier to nail that

style early on. Right from the start you'll find a merchant willing to sell you helpful items and a blacksmith who'll upgrade weapons and infuse them with abilities like fire and magic. Veterans might balk at these helpers not being hidden away deep in the overworld, as in the previous games, but we welcomed the streamlining.

Rather than radically overhaul a fine combat system, FromSoftware have massaged it with a new FP bar. FP is depleted by magic and miracles, or using the new weapon skills – special moves that come with every weapon. Some of these moves feel like style over substance; spinning attacks that will make for better "let's plays" than sleek combat strategies. Others grant smart status buffs – such as a roar that spurs you on to hit harder – or more outlandish powers, such as a sword that lets you throw storms. Souls purists can easily complete most of the adventure ignoring the weapon skills entirely, but they do



078

→ appeal to our inner hoarder. With new moves in the offing, seeking out rare loot is more compelling than ever.

Skills don't only consume FP. Their achingly slow wind-up times and showier animations cost seconds that nastier foes, such as our old pal The Dancer, refuse to give you. Indeed, with our balletic quarry limiting us to stabs and retreats it's not long before she skewers us and we drop the souls we'd collected from vanquished foes. These aren't just proof of how strong you are, but pay for upgrades. Fail to reclaim a dropped stash before dying afresh, and it vanishes for good.

Thankfully, FromSoftware's gift for monster design means you'll happily

gut them again, especially with their bestiary groaning with fresh threats. You'll face white-eyed jailers who burn you with branding irons; cage spiders, where several weak undead crammed together in tiny cages use their free limbs to crawl towards you and share their pain; or sewer centipedes, who resemble female corpses bobbing on the surface of the water, until you get too close. FromSoftware's creature design, while always great, has never been this demented or inspired. We won't be forgetting the twisty-necked, baby-faced prisoners for at least a few more years of therapy.

It would have been so easy for FromSoftware to use new-gen to

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Action-RPG sequel that is more hardcore than the middle of a diamond apple.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Its predecessors, but with better bosses, less flab and an actual framerate.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Surprisingly, newcomers will find it more accessible than the first game.

chunk another dozen knights into each fight for a perfunctory difficulty spike. Instead, they up the scale, creating obstacles like multiple dragons guarding a castle entrance or a cathedral occupied by restless giants. Monsters that would be final bosses in less ambitious games are here as just another environmental obstacle to be traversed. It's exactly what we hoped for from an Xbox One sequel, delivering an experience that's unmistakably Dark Souls but wouldn't have been possible on 360.

If looks could kill

You'll find yourself backtracking often. Not because you're forced to (or because you're trying to put off another round with The Dancer), but because... well, look at it. We doubt the remainder of 2016 will take us anywhere as hauntingly beautiful as Irithyll of the Boreal Valley. Snow-draped castles glow in twilight, their grounds occupied by ghosts and fire witches that feel like they've spilled from the architecture and glided into life. Messages (left by other players) that read "Gorgeous view ahead" have never felt more obsolete, as depleting daylight pours over magnificent and ancient ruins. We were left gawping at sunsets as if we'd never seen one before. Surely that orange blob doesn't look this enchanting in real life? Praise the sun? We'd marry it.



LEFT Lovely flame effects help take some of the edge off being set on fire for the hundredth time.



ABOVE Monster design isn't for the faint-hearted. You'll go up against monstrosities worthy of *Silent Hill*. Cripes.

LEFT Bonus of your face catching fire - you won't be able to see those freaks.

These are not merely pleasant backdrops, either. If you see land in the distance, no matter how far, you'll be exploring it. After *Souls II* dropped the original game's interconnected landmass, *Souls III* is a welcome return to environmental form, with every new path and shortcut discovered carrying a feeling of victory.

The skies alone are so striking that you initially feel disappointed whenever the adventure sends you inside. But the feeling doesn't last. With its darkened catacombs full of floor traps, angry spirits, rickety bridges and skeleton warriors that refuse to stay dead, there's more danger and mystery in these lairs than Ms Croft has managed in years.

A long 40+ hours game is actually shorter than its predecessors, and all the sweeter for it. There's none of the original's tedious invisible pathways, or *Souls II*'s over-reliance on drab castles and unintuitive world design making it unclear where to go next. Even *Souls III*'s weakest area - the slightly overfamiliar High Wall of Lothric opening - is exquisitely paced. We could happily lament its predecessors' cheap design tricks all day. (We'll never forgive the evil placement of Anor Londo's archers in the original. Never.) Whenever we try recalling similar flaws in *Souls III*, we come up empty. We just wish we could explore it all for the first time again.

Wait! How could we have been so stupid? The boss preventing our progress isn't called the "Keep Your Shield Up of the Boreal Valley". It's a *dance*. You have to roll with her

SHARE THE PAIN

Using an ember, an extremely rare item, makes your health bar longer and lets you summon other players to help you with boss fights. It's the closest *Souls III* comes to an easier difficulty mode and there's no shame in using it. Ahem, not that we ever had to, of course...



"Monsters that would be final bosses in lesser games are just another obstacle"

strikes, even when there are five in a row. That's it! One - good! Two - yes! Three - nailed it! Four - go me! Five - no! Failure. Unfit even to be ashes.

World's best boss

Ahem. Sorry about that. Anyway, notice who we blame for these deaths. It's always us, which we couldn't claim for previous Souls 'walls'. Ornstein and Smough may be regarded as one of the best boss fights in gaming, but personally we found their tag-team tactics cheaper than your burglar asking to borrow your removal van. And *Dark Souls II*'s Pursuer symbolised everything wrong with that game - a dumb floating knight is FromSoftware autopiloting at their least creative. Our thoughts on the Dancer of the Boreal Valley after some fifty defeats? One of the most graceful, ingeniously structured boss fights we've fought. That's what sets *Souls III* apart. It's less padded, more epic in scope and never felt like such a fair game.

The Dancer is not an anomaly. Not since *Resident Evil 4* - 11 years ago - have we seen such a consistent stream of unforgettable boss battles. There's the dragon that gives chase as you sprint through a tangled maze

of battlements and weaker foes, desperately scaling upwards to a vantage point where you can leap at its only weak point. Or perhaps you'll fall to the cursed Greatwood, an evil tree that throws a groundbreaking temper tantrum, sending you and your enemies tumbling into a mass grave. These are just two of the many indelible encounters we're struggling not to spoil - and these examples are completely optional. Any other game would kill to finish on these fights. Here they're mere extras, problems you can abandon at any time.

Except you can't. Once *Dark Souls III* sinks its claws into you, good luck resisting another attempt. No matter how stressed it made us, we always came back for more. Always. And finally, after countless tries, the Dancer falls. We drop the controller, hands shaking with adrenaline. This is the euphoria we'd felt in previous games, but never so consistently. A more streamlined Souls lets us focus on its key underlying lesson: there's no satisfaction in running away from your problems. Do yourself a favour, make *Dark Souls III* one of them. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

FromSoftware have improved and refined an action-RPG series without parallel. Essential.

9



PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / DEVELOPER IRON GALAXY / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £15.99



Killer Instinct Season 3

MICROSOFT'S FLAGSHIP FIGHTER C-C-C-CONTINUES TO IMPRESS **ANDI HAMILTON**

The future of fighting games on the Xbox One is looking quite strange right now. With *Street Fighter V* – the fighting game

of the moment – being a PlayStation exclusive, the fighting community appear to be adopting Sony's black box as the machine of choice when it comes to all things fighting. *King of Fighters XIV*? PlayStation. No Xbox date for *Tekken*. No *Guilty Gear*.

Twitter laughed when Major Nelson shrugged off Sony acquiring the exclusive console rights to *Street Fighter V*, putting it down as "one of those things that happen" and stating that they would be concentrating on *Killer Instinct*. It seemed like a comment borne of desperation and damage control at the time, but here we are, a year or so removed from it and, well, it might not have been as silly as we first thought. *Killer Instinct* has now established itself as a major player in the burgeoning fighting game scene, through things like

Microsoft attracting some big-name players who've injected generous amounts of cash into tournament prize pools, a free-to-play model that means that anyone can, at the very least, give the game a go without having to reach for their wallets, and two seasons of additional characters and content of the highest quality.

Fighting fit

So here we are at the start of the third season of *Killer Instinct* and things are most intriguing. Since the Xbox One version of the game was first launched in 2013, it has morphed into a fully featured fighter with some interesting game modes, a really robust tutorial and netcode that is so good there must be some kind of actual witchcraft at play. How much more can developers Iron Galaxy feasibly add to the proceedings? First of all, there are only four original *Killer Instinct* characters left who haven't already appeared – Tusk, Kim Wu (both featured here) and the two original boss characters, Eyedol and Gargos

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

The third 'season' of content for Rare's resurrected beat 'em up.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

The original *Killer Instinct* arcade games only, y'know, actually good. Sorry everyone!

WHO'S IT FOR?

Own an Xbox One and like fighting games? This is something you must own.

– so the rest are going to be either completely original creations (which to be fair, Iron Galaxy have already shown themselves to be a dab hand at) or guest appearances from other games.

Iron Galaxy have dipped into Microsoft's roster of characters and plucked out a few notable names to make up a good portion of the eight new combatants. There is Rash, of course, the brash Battletoad who they beta-tested last year, only now with a few tweaks to his move set and a default character skin a bit more in-line with the *Killer Instinct* universe. He's a character with great mobility, as he can attack and evade to and from almost anywhere on the screen, and there are a couple of fantastic little references to his scrolling beat 'em up appearances (whoever had the idea to allow him to walk around with a held opponent a la the original *Battletoads* deserves a raise).

The other surprising guest addition is the Arbiter, Master Chief's alien buddy from *Halo 2*. He's one of the most interesting characters in a



LEFT Hey, it's the Arbiter! Y'know, that one from the slightly crap parts of *Halo 2*, remember? He's good here.

"The new stagger state allows you to open up or continue a huge combo"

game already full of them and comes packing a spread of the skills he's brought with him from his parent series. He's got an overshield, which stops projectiles, can chuck grenades and – by pulling the right trigger – has a carbine rifle with limited ammo.

Kim Wu and Tusk round out the first four new characters, with Wu boasting an air-dash and the handy ability to counter hit fireballs back at her opponent, while Tusk is basically a walking Nordic mountain who can parry his foe's strikes and make them scared of pressing a single button.

Cloak and stagger

There have also been a few tweaks – some more obvious than others. First of all, some moves can cause an all-new stagger state, which gives you the chance to open up or continue a huge combo. Tusk is built around this new mechanic, as many of his best attacks don't combo, so staggering his opponent first allows him to hit combo openers with less risk. Combo Breakers now reset both players into

FAR LEFT Rash's throw – taken straight from *Battletoads* – is pure fire. Ahem.

RIGHT His mighty greatsword is a hefty thing to use, but the bone-crunching impact is worth all the effort.



MODEL FREEMIUM

The words free-to-play strike fear into the hearts of most gamers – not without good reason, either – but *Killer Instinct* is a shining example of how to make this model work. Anyone can download the game and play almost all of the content with a revolving cast of characters for absolutely nothing. Anyone can give it a go. So go do it.

a neutral position, as previously some characters in the game had a greater advantage in that situation. There's also an all-new lighting engine, which gives a new lease of life to familiar stages. Every character has had little nips and tucks, ensuring that the game is as balanced as possible.

Moving forward, we've already seen a few of the forthcoming characters. *Killer Instinct 2*'s final boss, Gargos, all-new vampire character Mira, and none other than General RAAM from *Gears of War* are all set to appear over the next year, with one final character remaining a mystery right now. There's also a new mode – Shadow Lords – coming in *Season 3*. Information about this is very slim at the time of review, but Iron Galaxy state that it is 'part Arcade mode, part ranked ladder, part Story Mode and part roguelike', which sounds pretty unique for a

fighting game mode, and conjures up images of *Soulcalibur II*'s brilliant Weapon Master mode. This all shows a real commitment to making *Killer Instinct* one of the most fun, best supported and content-rich fighting games on the market. People may look elsewhere for fighting games, but without an Xbox One and *Killer Instinct* there's now no denying that they're missing out on something great. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

Killer Instinct has grown into a real contender. An essential part of any Xbox library.

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PUBLISHER 505 GAMES / DEVELOPER FORGE REPLY / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £11.99

Joe Dever's Lone Wolf Console Edition

THIS BEAUTIFUL DARK TWISTED FANTASY SOON GETS UGLY CHRIS SCHILLING

The night is still young, and we must push on. "Your muscles ache with combat fatigue," we're told. Don't we know it – we've just spent the last half-hour trying to reach the local merchant for a tincture to heal our wounds, and we can't go 30 seconds without being ambushed. We're well aware that in keeping with the traditions of its source material, this grim fantasy tale is supposed to be an arduous journey. But developers Forge Reply choose the worst possible option to convey the struggle, one that only exacerbates its worst tendencies. It's got a Dever, and its only prescription is more combat.

It's a real shame, as this follow-up to the author's classic gamebook begins with a fair amount of promise. It opens on a dusty tome resting on a plinth in a room shrouded in darkness save for a lone candle casting its flickering light onto the open pages. Instantly, you know that there's going to be plenty of reading involved, but the presentation of the text is excellent, and if Dever's writing is eager to lean upon the kind of clichés that weren't nearly so firmly established when he wrote the original Lone Wolf books, it's still a page-turner.

Choose your battle

This is a narrative you get to shape, of course, with early choices determining the abilities of your wandering protagonist. We're aiming to be smarter than your average wolf, and opt for a range of abilities that should allow us to think and dodge our way out of trouble – and, failing that, call upon some animal assistance in a pinch. Rather than rushing into battle mindlessly, we're frequently given options that will thin out enemy numbers or avoid trouble entirely. At one point, we use our crossbow to knock down a handily placed torch, causing a large explosion that sets our opponents alight letting us capitalise on the confusion. A little earlier in the

RIGHT The game's iOS origins are most glaringly apparent during battle: surely a more stylised approach would have been better.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A continuation of the much-loved gamebook series from the '80s and '90s.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Sharply written and absorbing at first, it descends into drudgery and dodgy dice rolls.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone familiar with the series who is happy to let a dice roll dictate their fate.



"If your number's up, there's nothing you can do to change it"

game we'd called upon a colony of bats to create a distraction. Sometimes you'll be given a choice with several options, some of which are greyed out. "You didn't master this discipline", it says, and you wonder how else you might have been able to deal with your current dilemma had you rolled a different build.

For a while, you'll find yourself satisfied with the way gamebook combat has been translated into something a little more direct. It's based around quick time events, as you hammer the A button to charge up Mindblast attacks, jab B to dodge an incoming blow, and roll the stick left and then down to launch a tasty combo. The inputs are exactly the same each time, which means they're very difficult to fail, though with each action having an accompanying cost and cooldown timer, you can't simply launch a flurry of your most powerful moves without leaving yourself open to reprisals. Not least as you'll often find that, as one enemy falls, another will stride forward to take their place.

In theory, new enemies represent the biggest threat because you're not accustomed to their moves, and thus your rhythm is disrupted. But you'll find yourself fighting the same types over and over again. For long stretches, all you'll face are Giaks (orcs), Drakkarim (bigger orcs with better armour) in increasing numbers. The arrival of a new kind of foe comes as a relief, until you realise that you're still using the exact same techniques with the exact same animations, and only the length of your opponents' health bars has changed. Success, then, is more tightly bound to the roll of an invisible die, one that so regularly conjures unreasonable outcomes that you wonder if the author should actually be called Joe Diva. If your number's up there's nothing you can do to change it. Sorry, Lone Wolf, you're stuck with a 6. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

Fortune favours the persistent in a virtual gamebook that's more tedious the longer you play.

6

PUBLISHER EXPERIENCE INC / DEVELOPER EXPERIENCE INC / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £27.99

Stranger of Sword City

HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS AND BE AN ALIENATED PERSON **MATT GILMAN**

A JRPG coming as a home console exclusive to Xbox? Stranger things have happened. Things such as the story to this stat-em-up (itself a remake of a Japan-only Xbox 360 game).

It pits you as an unnamed avatar, whose visage you pick out from the anime equivalent of a usual suspects line-up (cat-eared, large-chested ladies and stern looking, heavily armoured pouters abound). You run through a rudimentary overlay of statistics and whatnot then, crunch, the plane you happened to be on has crash-landed in the modern day. After falling unconscious you awake on the outskirts of the titular fantasy-trope-strewn city. Always the way, eh?

This is the type of JRPG that hasn't seen much love in the west; at least, not to the broad scale of the likes of your Final Fantasys, your Star Oceans, or even your Tales. In *Stranger of Sword City*, you're not controlling a party of individual characters offered up for you to befriend or uncover the personalities of as you move through a linear story. Instead, one of the first things you do when you arrive in the city is create your own cast of heroes, using pre-existing character portraits and the same stat barrage you endured during your own avatar creation. Once complete, you drag these unchanging portraits (for that's all you ever see of your party) into the field for a rigorous dungeon crawl.

And by dungeon crawling, we mean mid-'90s dungeon crawling. Each area outside of the titular city is explored

RIGHT The hero art comes in three flavours of anime, including this almost western-ish style.

BELOW Everything is static. The only animations you'll see in the game are those of your attacks during battle.

short
cut

WHAT IS IT?

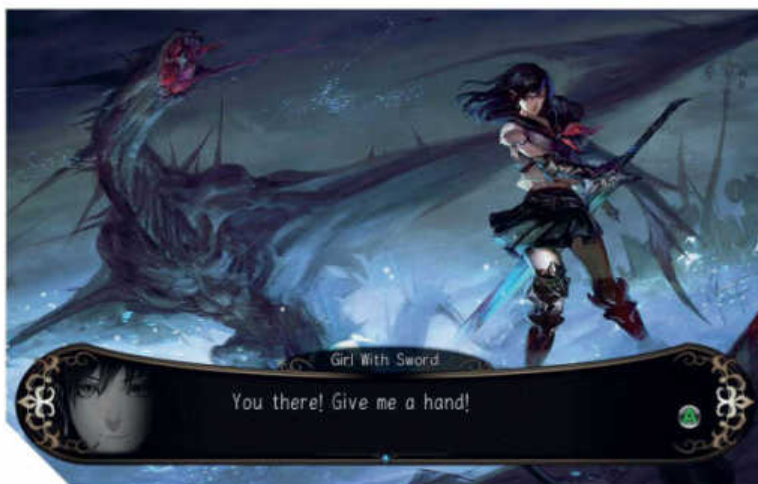
JRPG dungeon crawler in which your protagonist wakes up in a fantasy land.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Pencilling in graph paper while being occasionally interrupted by a picture of a goblin.

WHO'S IT FOR?

JRPG-starved fans and people with an unhealthy taste for cat-eared ladies.



"It's like we've been teleported into a giant Excel spreadsheet"

from a first-person perspective as you navigate by shifting around a squared grid. Expect random battles aplenty, though these are just as rigid an affair as the rest of the game, with enemy portraits popping up for your invisible array of protagonists to swipe at. Exploration is lent some intrigue by Hiding Spots, areas where you're able to spend saved up Morale points in order to get the jump on enemies nearby and pinch some primo loot. But, ultimately, going through the motions of revealing each new area's map feels like busywork, as if we've been teleported into a giant Excel spreadsheet and are trying to navigate our way to freedom with only personality-free husks for company.

Face value

And it's the lack of personality which does for the story, too. Your own team don't have any impetus beyond hitting things, but there are tertiary characters whom you befriend in the city instead. Shopkeepers and guild leaders all do their bit to inject

character into the affair, but when even their portraits are recycled from the party character builder their individuality feels a tad phoney.

All of *Stranger of Sword City*'s depth lies in the realms of stats associated with each of your party members. There's an initially engaging collection of character classes to fiddle with and there's a neat injury/recovery/permadeath system which cleverly forces you to switch party members around and experiment as you move deeper into the dungeons.

Ultimately, though, beyond the numbers – which will only entice a certain type of hardcore fan – there's little else going on in *SoSC* worthy of recommendation. The sad fact is that despite a dash of Japanese quirk, some nice artwork and that aforementioned stat-age, it's just an incredibly one note game. Dungeon crawling in a very literal sense. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

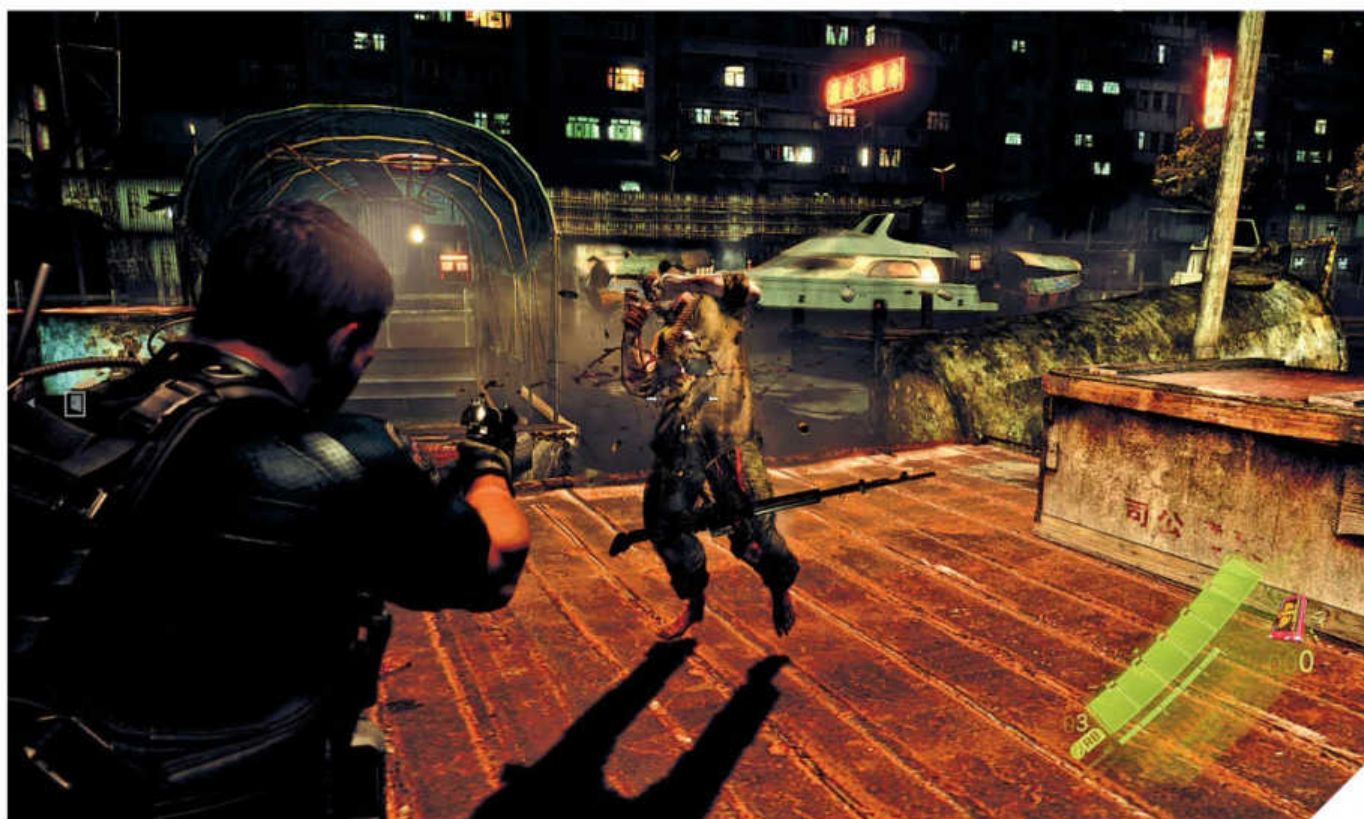
No amount of lovely art can prevent this stat-fest from causing chronic yawns.

5



PUBLISHER CAPCOM / DEVELOPER CAPCOM / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £15.99

Resident Evil 6

FOUR GAMES FOR THE PRICE OF DUMB **MATTHEW CASTLE**

084

Do you remember when Capcom went mad and made four Resident Evil games at the same time? It was either an act of

hubris worthy of the series' cackling mad scientists or a studio struggling to decipher what made the fans tick. Torn between the acclaim of *Resident Evil 4* and the sales success of 5 (still Capcom's best-selling game to date) the studio simply decided to build four standalone campaigns at once. Some of it had to stick, right?

The 2012 critics were not kind. They saw only directionless bloat, far separated from the survival horror of old. Which is a little unfair. Playing it now, with time for tempers to cool, we see how each *RE6* strand is designed to appeal to a different era of Resi fan.

Leon's stretch taps most cleanly into the survival action of *RE4* with its limited ammo, classic undead and an

abundance of hoary horror locations. Would a man with Leon's CV really set foot in a cemetery or sewer again?

Chris' jaunt, meanwhile, builds on *RE5*'s muscular gunplay and stressful crowd control – albeit losing some of Resi's patented otherworldliness by nabbing set-pieces from the Call of Duty playbook. Being flanked by a squad of military grunts also saps the tension – already on the wane after *RE5* added co-op shoulders to cry on.

Your co-op buddy vanishes during Ada Wong's storyline, where cryptic puzzles channel the earliest games. On Xbox 360, Ada's tale unlocked after the other three, as her journey fills in the blanks around their criss-crossing paths. It's accessible from the start on Xbox One, but newcomers should watch out for its spoiler-filled events.

Of those other 'routes', the most critically maligned sees *RE2*'s Sherry Birkin partner with Wesker Jr as they attempt to flee a relentless pursuer.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Four Resident Evil games delivered at the same time. Messy, then.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Four variations on *RE4*'s third-person shooting. One slow, one fast, one smart and one dumb.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Lovers of goopy headshots and the more open-minded Resi fan.

The unstoppable Urstanak reminds us of *RE3*'s Nemesis, but his boss fights are too scripted and frustrating to be truly scary. That said, we're fond of the sheer stupidity of their quest: a snowmobile-aided avalanche escape; a punch-up with Chinese bug men; a motorbike chase; a stealth section with noise-sensing flies... By the end, even the tenth Urstanak revival turns from eye-rolling bore to a begrudging respect for Capcom's overripe design.

Resident Evil more

Jake's everything-but-the-kitchen-sink adventure is a good taster of all that is right and wrong about *Resident Evil 6*. It's a game with eyes bigger than its stomach, but one that gobbles up loads of good ideas during its greedy rapture. Take the combat. At first glance it pollutes the over-the-shoulder purity of *RE4* with wall-hugging, backwards dives, counter hits, a ramming dash and a

“Each Resident Evil 6 strand will appeal to a different era of Resi fan”

RIGHT This boss fight is pretty rotten. Worse, you have to do it twice. Urgh.

FAR LEFT Gunplay is nice and gooey – has some of the best headshots in the biz, too.



LEFT Prepare to paint the walls red during Jake's big jail escape. Pity the janitor.



shoot-from-the-hip quick shot. None are explained clearly in tutorials; you could easily make it to the end credits without knowing half of them existed.

Learn its intricacies, however, and the familiar gunplay blossoms into an expressive action system built around evasion (kinda important in Resi) and staggering, the latter opening dizzied mutants up for the kind of melee showboating usually reserved for Fire Pro Wrestling. Guns are only one slither of *RE6*'s action vocabulary – they instigate a conversation that ends with piledrivers and flying kicks. It's dazzlingly flamboyant stuff.

Perhaps the campaigns aren't the best place to put it through its paces. It's too busy yanking away controls for another quick time event-filled boss fight or scripted chase sequence to let you sink into the survival mentality needed to stretch these abilities. The true test chamber is Mercenaries, the returning score attack mode, appearing

FRIEND IN NEED

Co-op partners drain the tension, but the campaign does work hard to keep both heroes in play. Stages will separate the two, or give them specific tasks – protecting Sherry with Jake's remote controlled turret, for example. The whole game can be played in split-screen, too.

here with all DLC maps included. The time bonuses it awards for a close-quarters 'coup de grace' or a counter get you to play up close and personal, training you in wider action intricacies.

If this wasn't enough for your £16, you also get the game's bizarre online modes. Hopping into another agent's story as one of its enemies feels like a one-man take on *Left 4 Dead*'s versus fun (unless you spawn as an undead mutt). Other modes – such as a riff on *Puyo Puyo* where your chained kills flood a rival's area with fiends – show a degree of flair, even if the lobbies are ghost towns. A good setting for one of Leon's levels, perhaps?

That £16 also buys you a gorgeous visual overhaul. A silky 60 frames per second is transformative for those who played on Xbox 360: the guns are more responsive, the animations flow better and you can really appreciate what is still the best looking entry in the series (*Revelations 2* was no

looker, after all). Expanding the field of view is also a better fit for the frantic action and makes our heroes look and feel less lumbering in the process.

Many problems can't be fixed, sure. The story honks. C-virus creatures are never as terrifying as *RE4*'s shambling Ganado. In fact, it's not a great horror game, period. It may not be the dream template for future Resident Evils, but I'll forgive Capcom their moment of madness. *Resident Evil 6* is big and bloated, but always barny fun. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

Given time and space we finally appreciate *RE6* for the dumb actioner it is. Nice port, too.

8

PUBLISHER PQUBE / DEVELOPER MILESTONE / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £49.99

MXGP 2: The Official Motocross Videogame

WE'D MOTOCROSS THIS ONE OFF YOUR SHOPPING LIST **BEN MAXWELL**

MXGP 2 is the sequel to Milestone's underwhelming 2014 Xbox 360 game *MXGP: The Official Motocross Videogame* – a game that somehow managed to be even duller than its name. Like any dutiful sequel *MXGP 2* builds on the past, in that there's more here and what's on offer is considerably more underwhelming.

MXGP 2 takes advantage of its 2015 Youthstream licence to pack in 18 real-world tracks, the complete MXGP and MX championship rosters, a tasty phalanx of 250cc and 450cc tech, and a newly added MXoN (Motocross of Nations) event. It offers various other championship and single events, including the option to kick off with a customised driver, bike and selected sponsors (okay, we went with whoever would fund our consistent last placing and race retirements), but there's little to distinguish between them.

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Paper pushing

The new management component of the career mode is perfunctory at best, giving you a little admin to do as you sift through repetitive emails from dead-eyed corporate execs who see something special in you, kid. You may also feature in an MX magazine, and your rep will bring fresh offers from teams plus further sponsorship. But there are no gameplay or perk-based differences between the various

RIGHT The pack looks cool when bunched up, but the framerate soon plummets.

BELOW Fictional indoor tracks will make you wish you were playing *Excitebike 64*.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Officially licensed motocross game based on the 2015 season and even older game engine.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Generous with the content, but this broad spread is undermined by its shallow nature.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Lovers of motocross, poor framerates and badly rendered women holding start signs.



"MXGP 2 pulls off an unappealing mix of the fussy and the rigid"

bodies keen to throw all that green at you, so it all feels like busywork.

It's busywork you'll have lots of time for while waiting for the game to load. We reckon you could dig out your Xbox 360 and the first game from the attic, get everything set up, then bag every Achievement in the original in the time it takes *MXGP 2* to load a single track.

It's all the more maddening when you see what has loaded. *MXGP 2* is ugly. Scrappy textures and dull lighting melt into a brown morass, some character models look like they've been torn from the original Xbox, and trackside objects fail to look like part of the world. Mud is difficult to pretty up, sure, but this is horrible.

It's not all bad. The bikes and riders themselves look great, providing some much needed colour, and the draw distance on the tracks – which can take in dramatic elevation changes – will elicit a grunt of begrudging respect on occasion. But it all comes

at the cost of a decent framerate. It puts in a stable effort during time trials, but once you're joined by 21 other riders, things degrade quickly.

The game offers up three physics models, from Base to Pro, but it's hard to tell them apart. In all cases, *MXGP 2* pulls off an unappealing mix of fussy and rigid – there's a surprising amount of nuance in your available inputs, which take in front and rear brakes, clutch and rider weight distribution, but you never really feel connected to the ground or your bike, and you soon wish your rider would stop cheerily bouncing back from all the crashes he's having and just die. There's a rewind option for when you make a big mistake, but using it will prolong the time you spend with the game, and we wouldn't recommend that. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

Tries to address fans' wishes, but wobbles under the weight of its hollow generosity.

4



PUBLISHER TRU BLU / DEVELOPER WICKED WITCH / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £39.99

Rugby Challenge 3

A TUILAGI-SIZED FEND TO THE FACE OF RUGBY FANS **ANDY HARTUP**

Rugby fans have waited decades for a decent videogame. We've sat through a mountain of dross, licensed by the various international governing bodies, and released to coincide with the biggest tournaments. For every arrival there's a brief flicker of hope that this will be the one; this is the year rugby gets the game it deserves. And, inevitably, that hope is dashed seconds into the game itself. *Rugby Challenge 3* continues this proud tradition of crushing disappointment.

Initial expectations were high. It does, after all, have all the official teams from the Aviva Prem, the Pro12, the French Top 14, and a bunch of southern hemisphere leagues. There are a stack of modes too, including tournament options, leagues, Be A Pro, and the ability to play both the 15-person game and rugby sevens. There's plenty of stuff in here. It's a shame then that all of it is dreck.

Rucking hell

The Aviva Premiership teams are all a year out of date (which there really is no excuse for), so Sam Burgess is still on the teamsheet for Bath, and Worcester Warriors, who won promotion for the 2015/16 season, don't feature. Not that any of the actual players make much difference.

You spend 90 per cent of your time hammering A to commit players to each breakdown, before passing the ball out (or picking and going) and getting immediately smashed. And, yes, you get to ruck again. It's eye-gougingly dull. It certainly bores the commentary team to tears. Justin Marshall and Grant Nisbett sound as if they've delivered their lines in a different room to the microphone, the quality is so appalling, and the things they actually say often bare little relation to what's happening on the pitch. "A lovely run," they mumble, as our scrum-half is driven back five metres after an ill-informed snipe down the blindside. "That try could change the course of the game," they

RIGHT Player likenesses are pretty good, which looks okay in replays. Sadly, nothing the game does actually warrants a replay.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

The latest in a series of rugby games with all the official licences for the Aviva Premiership and Pro12.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Garbage. The official licences are the best thing about this car crash of a game.

WHO'S IT FOR?

People who enjoy rugby and take a perverse pleasure in their desire for a great rugby videogame being crushed, utterly.



"There's plenty of stuff in here. It's a shame then that all of it is dreck"

enthuse, as my opponents score on the stroke of 80 minutes, to bring the scoreline to 23-5.

All this would be forgivable if the actual rugby mechanics and decision-making were solid – but it's a catastrophe, as everyone just chases the ball like a bunch of schoolboys. Passing is a disaster on two levels. You can either snap passes between players in a deeply unnatural way, as if the ball is on string, or the complete opposite happens, where simple off-loads go to ground because the support player isn't smart enough to follow you through a line break.

Tackling is okay, but if you mistime a hit, your player will wait a few seconds and meekly throw themselves to the ground, miles away from the intended target, before *so goddamn slowly* getting back to his feet. And – there's no sugar-coating this – scrums have so much forced, badly recorded grunting, they sound like a male orgy.

The problems worsen in Be A Pro. Here you pick a single player and play out your time in either the French

second division or a lower Aussie league. We plumped for a fly-half, figuring he'd be the lynchpin of each attacking move, and at the heart of organising defence. Because that's what happens in rugby. After several games, we'd touched the ball an average of twice per game, and spent the rest of the time – you guessed it – rucking. Oh, and cursing the idiotic decision making of our AI-controlled team-mates who assume it's okay to run directly into touch when shadowed to the wing and kick the ball long in the opposition's 22.

While it comes from a place of passion, *Rugby Challenge 3* is another rake to the face of rugby fans, and a sad reminder that these games are so far behind the likes of FIFA, NBA 2K and Madden that it's embarrassing. If rugby is the sport you love, save yourself the pain and fury, and simply forget this even exists. **OXM**



OXM VERDICT

One of the worst titles on Xbox One, and another savage disappointment for rugby fans.

2

indie digest



EVERY MONTH OXM'S INDIE EXPERT ALEX DALE ROUNDS UP THE ACTION FROM THE MORE, UM, 'ARTISANAL' CORNERS OF THE XBOX STORE

As a gamer of a certain age (old age), I think the thing I like most about today's indie scene is how many of them take well-established premises from games that were full-price offerings 20-25 years ago, and give them inventive, modern-day twists. Take, as an example, *101 Ways To Die* (Four Door Lemon, £10.39) which is, for all intents and purposes, the 1991 puzzle game *Lemmings*, but in reverse.

[Stares out at a sea of blinking, bewildered faces] Er, we do all remember what *Lemmings* is, right? For the uninitiated (or people who like having things they already know explained to them again), *Lemmings* was a riff on the (untrue) belief that these suicidal rodents would blindly follow each other off the end of cliffs. It was one of the first games to deny you direct control over the game's protagonists, instead casting you in the role of an overseeing mouse cursor, who had to guide



the relentlessly-marching dimwits to safety by assigning them roles – having one bash through a rock, say, or build a bridge, while the one behind blocks the path of the rest of the horde.

In *101 Ways To Die*, the concept is turned on its head. Instead, your goal is to prevent the automatons in your care from reaching the goal, and in as brutal a fashion as possible. The flow is slightly different to the source material; here you spend much of your time in pre-planning, arranging traps and bumpers in such a manner that it'll ricochet your plodding test

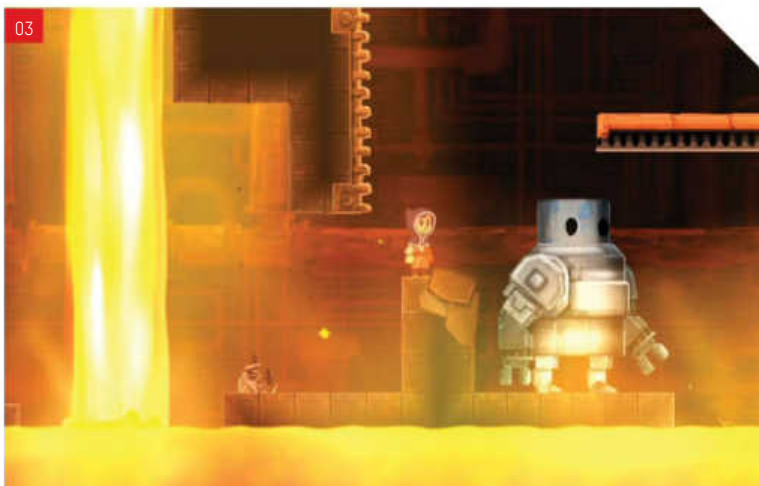


subjects (you're rebuilding a mad scientist's lair, see) to their doom. There's also some real-time reflexes involved too, with guns and mines that have to be manually detonated at the right time for maximum effectiveness. It's a novel twist on a tried-and-tested formula, and one that lends itself to some interesting physics conundrums once all the different elements have been introduced and the difficulty level ratchets up. For me, however, *Lemmings*' charm was down to its simplicity; there are a few too many gadgets and gimmicks in play here, which suggests a lack of confidence in the core concept. It's also a bit slow, and as inventive as some of the deaths are, they never quite nail the satisfying splat of a Lemming meeting concrete.

Of course, if you're in the market for satisfying splats, your shopping trolley's first port of call should be the fruit and veg aisle. **Organic Panic** (Last Limb, £11.99) is a puzzle-platformer that centres around the eternal war between fruit/veg and meat/cheese. While I know who's winning the race for lebensraum in my fridge, here you

BELOW You'll never look at your local Tesco's produce section in the same way again.





find yourself on Team VegFruit. Which is a good side to be on as it turns out, because while Team MeatCheese is capable only of destroying guts, Team VegFruit can level *entire levels* with their various destructive powers. So there's shades of 1992 SNES title *The Lost Vikings*, then, in that you find yourself swapping between characters to solve environmental puzzles, and shades of *Worms* in the sheer level of destruction that can be brought on the screen furniture. (And, mercifully, shades of *Trials HD*, in that there's a restart button if you trash the level so badly you can't complete it). Despite it all, the earth, ahem, didn't move for me – conceptually, it's nothing earth-shattering. But it's substantial, cute, and the physics are very well done. Plus, it's considerably more enjoyable if you rope a friend in as a co-op partner.

At the very least, I'd recommend it over this month's other puzzle-platformer, **Teslagrad** (Rain Games, £11.99). There's nothing overly bad

"101 Ways to Die is, for all intents and purposes, 1991's Lemmings, but in reverse"

about it, but it's the kind of cookie-cutter offering you've played dozens of times before. (And one of them might even have been this one, since it originally came out wayyyy back in 2013). I found pretty much everything about *Teslagrad* to be a bit 'me-too', from the cutesy steampunk visuals to the charmless electromagnetic physics puzzles. The uninspiring wrapping will likely mean you'll lose the will to unpack some of the game's more challenging puzzles, particularly as there are some vicious difficulty spikes in places.

Teslagrad originated in Norway, incidentally, while our next offering,



01 *101 Ways To Die* 02 *Organic Panic*
03 *Teslagrad*
04 *Stikbold! A Dodgeball Adventure*
05 *McDroid*

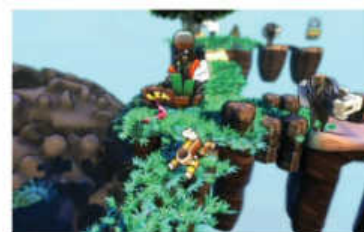
Stikbold! A Dodgeball Adventure

(Game Swing, £7.99), hails from fellow Scandianaviaviandian land, Denmark. Yes, that's the segue I'm going with, deal with it. (Ahh, I could have done something about difficulty spikes/spiking the ball, couldn't I? Shame my computer literally doesn't have a backspace key.) I'm a big fan of this one; a bright and breezy arcade-y spin on a sport that's rarely well depicted in videogame form, with a funky 1970s vibe to boot. Again, it's better in co-op, as the key to success is retaining possession – making sure that when a thrown ball is safe to touch again, a member of your own team is positioned to pick it up before the opposition.

This month's digest wraps up with a game I never thought I'd end up loving – **McDroid** (Elefantopia, £6.39). Tower defence games have existed since the Earth was a swirling pile of space dust that had yet to congeal into a planet, but few have captivated me like *McDroid*. The twist is that you're a physical, moving thing on the playing field, that has to scamper around healing the guns and harvesting strawberries for further ammo. It adds a degree of agency to a genre that can feel off-puttingly passive. The only downside I can see is your mothership's irritatingly 'quirky' persona, which even *Borderlands* would consider 'a bit much'. **OXM**



LEFT With *McDroid* boasting massive strawberries, it's all about the fruit and veg this month.



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THE LATEST AND GREATEST DLC AND UPDATES CHEWED UP AND DIGESTED FOR YOU **MATTHEW CASTLE**

FALLOUT 4 – AUTOMATRON

PRICE £7.99 OR £39.99
WITH SEASON PASS



There's a decent-sized new quest in this first DLC pack.

But if you found *Fallout 4*'s go-to-the-place-and-shoot-the-bads-in-the-face mission structure a little dated last year, then you're going to find a lot more of that here in *Automatron*'s fun (but very familiar) robot shooting galleries. The main draw is the option to build and modify your own robot companions (although they'll never be as cool as Nick Valentine). One of *Fallout 4*'s better innovations was making all that Commonwealth junk actually worth picking up. Now that collecting dead robot chunks makes it possible for you to build your own Terminator pal, plundering Boston for scrap has never been more addictive.

FALLOUT 4 – WASTELAND WORKSHOP

PRICE £3.99 OR £39.99
WITH SEASON PASS



The line between *Fallout 4* and *Mad Max* grows ever thinner,

now that you can force monsters and wastelanders into fights. Trophy hunting is also now an option, as animal heads can be mounted on to walls. So if you've always dreamed of having a dead bloatly hanging over your bed, seek help. Making people fight is fun, if counterintuitive to settlement well-being, but we preferred going full *Saw*, building death mazes. We filled these with spike traps, spinning blades that go back and forth waiting for someone to gut, and pressure plates that send jagged metal into wastelander shins. Hmm, maybe we're the ones who should be seeking help? Naah.

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER – COLD DARKNESS AWAKENED

PRICE £7.99 OR £19.99
WITH SEASON PASS



Set aside from the story, this Expeditions add-on

sees Lara tap into her shadowy side as she slinks past the slaving victims of a nuclear contamination. The presence of an unstoppable lunatic horde, and the lack of decent weapons until you snoop them out, makes this a tenser affair than the main game. It's a little contradictory having spent 20 hours cultivating Lara into a human tank, but at least it avoids the previous DLC pitfall of feeling like a needless remix of the campaign. Fattened out with a few puzzles, it's still bested in under an hour; no reason to pick up the season pass, then, even if it won't tarnish your *Rise* memories.

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT – OUTER RIM

PRICE £11.99 OR
£39.99 WITH THE
SEASON PASS

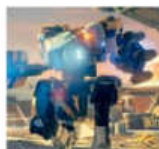


Value depends on expectations. If you're a fanboy

looking to tour more virtual film sets, then DICE's replicas of Jabba's throne room and barge are a treat. Accurate down to the rancid rancor in the basement, the eye for detail overshadows the fact that these are tiny maps in a game that plays best in epic encounters. With two Sullust maps also in tight confines, those seeking tactical thrills must turn to Extraction mode – a bland defend-the-moving-target task – and the enjoyably painful arsenals of heroes Nien Nunb and Greedo. In the world of a twitch FPS, here's hoping he shoots first this time.

HALO 5 GUARDIANS – GHOSTS OF MERIDIAN

PRICE FREE



In *Halo*'s latest free map drop, things get... intimate (not in a bottle of wine and

open log fire way). Tyrant, a new Arena map, is one of the smallest yet, a tight web of Forerunner gangways cut into a shattered planetoid. With few open lines of sight and paths of varying height, it leads to nervous rounds of CTF and Assault where clashes come quick and close. By Warzone standards Skirmish on Darkstar feels claustrophobic – buildings line every road, favouring infantry over vehicles, and the relative proximity of capture points means they easily change hands. With less downtime than other Warzone maps, it's a nice change of pace.

TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION – INCURSION UPDATE

PRICE FREE



Ubisoft's first major update aims to add a bit of bite to post-campaign play, but

proved too sharp for some unlucky agents – a glitchy rollout saw it delete their characters. Those who survived were rewarded with a clearer endgame: it's all about Gear Score, the collective power of all your kit (*Destiny*'s Light Score, then). Opportunities for tastier equipment include airdrops in the Dark Zone – creating thrilling swarms of greedy murderers – and the first 'incursion', Falcon Lost. The latter doesn't challenge *Destiny*'s Raids for ingenuity – it's little more than a 15-wave Horde map – but who can say no to its rare loot drops?

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NEXT MONTH

Our E3 celebrations
start early with new
reveals, we get the
inside scoop on
Dishonored 2 and
we deliver hot review
justice to Doom and
Homefront 2*

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*Contents subject to change. Please don't get angry if they do.





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 **XBOX** EXCLUSIVE 2015

“CINEMATIC THRILL-RIDE”

Telegraph

“I ENJOYED EVERY
ROLLICKING, BIG-HEARTED
SECOND OF IT”

IGN

“ONE OF THE BEST
ACTION ADVENTURES
OF THE YEAR”

Metro

“MORE THOUGHTFUL
AND REPLAYABLE”

Kotaku

“LARA CROFT IS EPIC”

Daily Star

“VISUALLY STUNNING”

Daily Star

“EVERYTHING I WANT
A VIDEO GAME TO BE”

Videogamer.com

“SINGLE-PLAYER
PERFECTION”

Pocket Lint

“ROLLICKING, GORGEOUS
AND CONFIDENT”

Telegraph

“THE PERFECT
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Immersion: it's that sweet spot where we forget we're sat on the sofa clutching a plastic pad and actually believe we're raiding a tomb as Lara Croft, or blasting pedestrians in GTA, or that we're a sentient totem pole head in **Kalimba** (p99). We just want to be absolutely convinced we're inside these interactive worlds – is that so much to ask? Alright, it's a fair bit to ask, but pity **Far Cry Primal** (p96) which comes painfully close to pulling it off. That's also one of the concerns our parkour obsessive has in his reassessment of the original **Mirror's Edge** (p98). Can an open-world sequel convince our slob he's capable of actually running, like the original did? Even 15 years later, our resident Spartan expert has no problem immersing himself in the original **Halo: Combat Evolved** (p102). An in-depth look at how Bungie started developing an RTS for the PC and ended up with one of the best console shooters ever. A bit like that time we tried to develop a pizza in the oven, and ended up with a burnt down house. One way to craft a believable world is to inhabit it with believable characters, and what's more believable than a person being horrible? **Mass Effect** (p106) heroine Ashley Williams gets some long over due praise. Largely dismissed as a 'space racist', by the sassy community, Ashley's actually a more well-rounded and thoughtful character than she's credited for, and helps to round out the series' lore nicely.



096



098



099



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095

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Far Cry Primal shows how the smallest loose ends can unravel even the most expansive and tightly-knit open worlds **ALEX DALE**

PUBLISHER UBISOFT / **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** FEB 2016

NOW PLAYING

Amnesty time: I'm a sucker for games that look really, really nice. Yes, I know, gameplay over graphics and all of that, but in this day and age there's no reason why we shouldn't expect both. And in any case, a beautifully realised world can be the ingredient that tips a good game into the realm of greatness.

Such is the case with *Far Cry Primal*. I've spent an inordinate amount of time losing myself in its world over the last few months, despite it being quite a meat and potatoes adventure game at heart. It doesn't even pass my 'is it fun to move around the map?' test which usually dictates whether or not I persist with an open world game, it being little more than a prehistoric reskin of *Far Cry 4*'s awkward, mountainous landscape. With the wheel yet to be invented, it is in fact a pain in the ancestral ass to get anywhere in *Primal*, even with the presence of fast travel and the ability to tame and ride beasts (which reportedly was a feature patched in late in the game's development to make travelling less of a slog).

But it's testament to how luscious and captivating *Far Cry Primal*'s stone age skin is that it took the entire world over a week to realise that Ubisoft had done little more than dump the Himalayas into northern Europe and add a few orange filters. But it doesn't matter. At their best, games have an ability to transport you to a different time and place that's unmatched by any other kind of media, and *Far Cry Primal* dumps you deep into prehistory just as painlessly as it dumps Everest onto Gothenberg.

Primal has you at 'hello' (or rather, 'ugg'). Within seconds of pressing start, you're in the zone: stranded in the middle of an ancient forest far, far away, rustling through the prehistoric foliage with your unintelligible caveman crew in the quest for something, anything, to kill and eat.

And then, with a screen-shuddering thud, your next meal stomps into view; a magnificent mammoth, its eye as close to our quivering avatar as this magazine is to your nose. We gingerly

follow the beast into an opening and there, partially-obscured in the thick primordial mist, is one of the most breathtaking scenes you'll see in videogames all year: an entire herd of mastodons, frolicking, playing, bathing.

It is an incredible opener that sucks you into *Primal*'s universe instantly, and it's one that, on the back of its immersive audio and visuals, the rest of the experience manages to live up to. It's such an easy world to lose yourself in that your mind starts filling in the gaps, and you begin explaining away the game's flaws as part of the larger fantasy. So what if it's a difficult world to get around in? This is the

stone age – you'd expect the terrain to be a little rugged and bruising.

The visuals are easily the game's greatest asset and it's no surprise that most of the changes Ubisoft have made to *Primal* post-release are geared towards heightening the immersion further. These include the ability to remove screen clutter, for crafting to take longer, and an option to make animals spawn less often, requiring hunters to lie in wait for their prey rather than sprinting around aimlessly until they eventually bump into a herd of deer.

The latter modification would be a disaster in a less absorbing game, but



in *Primal*, patiently stalking rare prey and earning every scalp through good hunting practice is all part of the fun. As I said, in a game this immersive, your imagination is keen to smooth over things that would be perceived as flaws in rougher offerings.

Off track

But it only takes one small bad piece of design to send even the most brilliantly conceived world crashing down to reveal the crude movie set underneath. *Primal*'s most disappointing element is one that had the potential to be brilliant – the Beast Master hunt quests, where you trail a mighty rare creature (such as the sabre-toothed tiger that wipes out your clan in the aforementioned opening) and hopefully weaken it enough to tame it to do your bidding.

On first play, it is exhilarating. Glimpses of the beast on the horizon as you follow its tracks instil a healthy level of fear; fear that panics your decision-making as you hurry around your camp setting traps and crafting supplies during the brief window before its impending arrival. The opponent is a worthy one – faster and stronger than the standard beasts, and sporting a health bar longer than you could chuck a spear. It is almost inevitable that this capable hunter will kill you on your first attempt, but that doesn't mean you can't go down swinging. At first, your primary instinct is simply to survive. Then thoughts slowly turn towards turning the tide – using the uneven terrain to your advantage to create enough distance between yourself and the animal to perform vital crafting; serving yourself up willingly as bait to trick the tiger into paths laden with traps.

And then, slowly, surely, superbly, the hunter becomes the hunted. With around a third of its health bar



“It’s such an easy world to lose yourself in that your mind explains away the flaws”

remaining, the tiger turns tail and runs back to its lair, allowing you to give chase and finish the job in its own backyard. Unfortunately, there's nothing more dangerous than a cornered animal, they say: once you're in the tiger's cave, space is

at a premium and any mistakes swiftly prove fatal. On

my first attempt I died having painstakingly whittled my foe down to about 10% of its health. When you experience a near-miss this heartbreaking, after battling for so long, and the prospect of starting afresh doesn't daunt you, you know you're dealing with some seriously good game design.

But then, on the second go around, the walls came crumbling down. When the beast returned to the scene, I was

shocked to discover that its health bar *didn't* regenerate. This was a game-changer, and not for the better. Without any tangible punishment for death, and thus no reason to stave it off, frantic, heart-stopping hunting instantly dissipated into a battle of attrition as I chipped disinterestedly at its health bar, falling and respawning numerous times. After ten minutes or so, the tiger finally cracked, and bent the knee for its new, cheaty master.

I must confess, a pang of shame runs through me every time I send my once-proud adversary into action to do my menial bidding for me. It looks up to me, sadness in its eyes, before I send it scurrying down a cliff to wage war with a bear, just so I am able to craft a slightly better meat bag or whatever. I have no business ordering this fearsome jungle creature around. He beat me fair and square. Bang to rights in his own cave. But by failing to punish failure, the game allowed me to cheat us both.

Perhaps the new survival mode, which forces you to get through the game on a single life, is the answer to this bad design decision. It'll be impossible for me to say though, sadly, because I really don't have the will to go through all that again. Once the walls of immersion come crashing down, it's impossible to build them back up again. **OXM**

ABOVE When we said that we wanted to go clubbing, this isn't quite what we had in mind.

WHAT IS IT?

Stone age re-imagining of *Far Cry*, with an emphasis on crafting and beast training in lieu of jeeps and guns.



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The legs have it: misunderstood masterpiece **Mirror's Edge** was more than a meaningless run around **BEN GRIFFIN**

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS / DEVELOPER EA DICE / FORMAT XBOX 360 / RELEASE DATE NOV 2008

NOW PLAYING

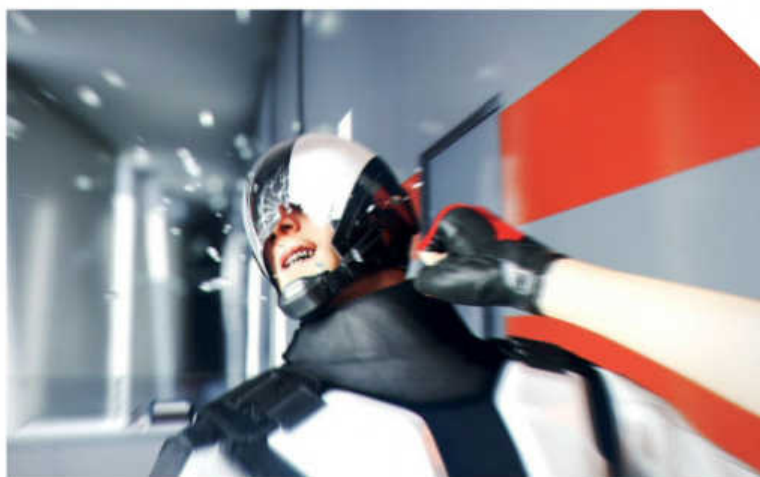
So I may have a job that involves sitting in an office chair all day, but I've watched enough YouTube videos to know a little about parkour. I know it's not about going at one speed for ages. That's called jogging. I know it's an inherently stop/start physical activity in which you survey environments to assess the best and ideally most spectacular route before tackling it. I know it's about exploration, navigation, puzzling and sometimes, if you're naughty, chasing. And I know that *Mirror's Edge* did an incredible job of portraying all of these facets inside of a futuristic dystopia.

Yet many condemn *Mirror's Edge* for its 'lack of flow'. Critics lament building up momentum only to lose it through what they deem confusing environmental design and hindering level layouts. I say if it was simply about maintaining a perpetual state of motion down a generally straight line it would have been little more than an iOS-style endless runner. Instead, DICE vary the tempo.

Take this scenario. Protagonist Faith clammers through a grand stone storm drain using pipes and hanging ladders to ascend both vertically and laterally. Suddenly, guards stream in below, their flashlights cutting a swathe through the darkness. She's climbing with more urgency now, finally reaching the summit as a sniper bullet pings the frame of the exit. Finally Faith enjoys a well-earned rest on a non-precarious footing.

Runner vision

There are degrees to the game's speed. Take the exploration aspect in which you first enter a space and marvel at its pristine design. Then there's navigation – sussing if you can springboard off that wall or crash land on that stack of boxes below. There are puzzles, one involving blowing a door off its hinges by turning on the gas and igniting a flame. There's chasing, where serene urban scampering gives way to urgent dashes against pot-shooting officers. One early section



"Mirror's Edge's linearity affords brilliant one-off set-pieces, like a daring escape off a train roof"

sets the stall as you flee a small army of trigger-happy security forces who stream into an office high-rise and shatter the glass around you.

And when you're backed into a corner, there's combat. Much-derided, firefights are only ever an option, and a de-emphasised one at that. Faith can neither climb holding a gun nor reload one, and there is even an

Achievement for completing the game without shooting anybody.

Divisive as *Mirror's Edge* is, it's surprising a sequel was commissioned at all. *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* arrives this month, and despite initial excitement, I'm concerned with its direction. The biggest problem for me is the open world, a topic the first game's producer, Nick Channon, addressed in a 2008 interview with website Gamasutra. "As soon as we'd have gone open world, I think that would've

watered it down... A lot of people think, nowadays, that open world's the way to go, and it's the next-gen thing. I don't think I believe it is."

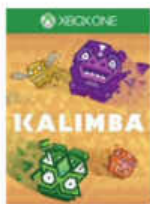
Why the u-turn? *Mirror's Edge's* linearity afforded brilliant one-off set-pieces, like sliding down a roof 40 storeys up as a chopper sprays bullets, or an escape across speeding train carriages. I fear *Catalyst* will rely on players to make their own 'wow' moments in a one-note open world.

It also breaks *Mirror's Edge's* always-first-person rule. Channon continues: "We really wanted to create a connection with you and the character, and the fact that you're playing the game through the eyes of Faith; as soon as you get to third-person, you would be watching Faith, whereas we want you to be connected to her." The sequel features cinematic third-person kill moves that momentarily remove you from the role-play fantasy.

That's not to say DICE haven't listened to criticism. This time you can't use guns at all, and the story isn't told with crudely animated cutscenes. But that was only ever background noise to the core experience. If *Catalyst* makes Faith's new trainers step to *Mirror's Edge's* rhythm, rolling its intentionally-paced action beats into an open world rather than winging it, then it'll be another athletic adventure I can enjoy from the confines of my office chair. **OXM**

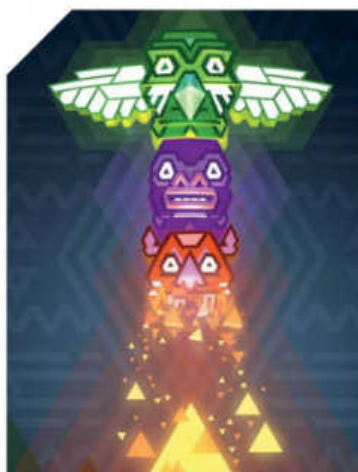
WHAT IS IT?

A futuristic freerunning adventure interspersing urban platforming with environmental puzzles and a sprinkling of gunplay.



As Press Play go to the great big developer studio in the sky, we revisit their totally – and totem-y – awesome **Kalimba** **KATE GRAY**

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / DEVELOPER PRESS PLAY / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE DEC 2014



"Get the hang of the deftness and intense concentration it requires, and you're hooked"

I probably raved on about in my gushing ten-out-of-ten review.

Tiny black triangles bounce around pretending to be lava, ice glistens in triangular blue crystalline structures and your character pieces themselves are like something out of *Jumanji* – brightly-coloured totem blocks that grimace and gurn as you tumble over gaps and somersault across the level.

All of this gorgeous chaos is presided over by Hoebear, a relaxed, drawing magical bear that guides you through the tricks and tips and secret levels, instructing and cajoling you as you go. The goal is to get to the end of the level without dying – standard platforming fare – but colour-coded segments, collectibles, and various shape-shifting make this a difficult feat. I've decided to be satisfied with merely reaching the finish line in one

WHAT IS IT?

Guide two coloured totem pieces through gauntlets, switching position, size and abilities to survive deadly traps.

In all my not-that-long career as a person who judges games with big numbers, I've only ever given out a single 10. Although that may be more of a statement about my editor's reluctance to award any game such a high honour, and testimony to my stubbornness in that one case, I stand by that score. In case you can't tell from the honking great title, that game is *Kalimba* – an underrated gem that deserved far more of a fanfare, especially given that it was made by a studio within Microsoft's own ranks.

Kalimba is my only perfect score, and for damn good reason. On paper it's nothing colossally exciting – a simple 2D puzzle-platformer that has you controlling two characters at once – but as soon as you get the hang of the deftness and intense concentration the game requires, you're hooked. The only bad thing I can say about it, other than the fact that it made me curse like a 12-year-old on Xbox Live, was that there wasn't enough of it.

Sadly, the studio behind *Kalimba* was shuttered at the same time as Lionhead – in the same press release, in fact – and poor Press Play's demise was buried under stories about how great *Fable 2* was. Which, of course, is true – but so was *Kalimba*. (And *Max & the Curse of Brotherhood*, Press Play's other, also excellent release. They had a great track record, did Press Play.) But I won't forget the time I spent with *Kalimba*, partly because it was a wonderful experience and partly because I'm incredibly bitter all my friends currently look down on me from their comfortable positions atop the online leaderboard. So smug.

At the heart of *Kalimba* is a simple design choice – to use "trixels", triangular pixels, rather than the standard boring square ones. The slight change in appearance this causes makes a big difference to the feel of the game, imbuing otherwise confident but fairly conventional platforming with the kind of charm

piece, but the leaderboard makes it clear that my friends are much more perfection-minded than I. A similarly competitive person might take this for a challenge. I do not.

Instead, I choose to revel in *Kalimba*'s unique take on a genre I don't really like all that much. I generally find platformers tedious, repetitive, simplistic and far too difficult to keep my attention for long. I think they can be needlessly challenging and – well, this isn't about my disdain for the platforming genre, it's about the one that showed me I'd been too quick to judge. *Kalimba* impressed me so much that it became one of my favourite games despite being one of my least favourite genres, and that's hard to do.

Grin and Hoebear it

I still find myself restarting levels over and over again, not because I am failing but because I can see exactly what I need to do and I'm merely struggling to get the jump timings just right. I imagine it's a bit like that with ballet, but ballerinas don't have to collect 70 hard-to-reach triangles as they flit around the stage – although I haven't seen a ballet in a while, so I could be wrong.

Kalimba has one of those deliciously devilish difficulty curves that makes everything look easy but keeps perfection just out of reach, leaving you grasping and trying and failing and striving for the game's approval in a way that could be considered Freudian. It's so beautifully balanced that frustrating mechanics always feel like the price to pay for fun, rather than a hassle or a tedious chore. And when you get it right, you get a gold star – or a gold totem piece, at least.

And in the end, that's all I want from *Kalimba* – the golden totem pole at the end that signifies a job well done in every level, and the respect and love of Hoebear. *Kalimba* itself is the gold totem at the end of Press Play's short, sweet career – it too signifies a job well done, and the respect and love of this writer. Why not pay your respects with a download today? **OXM**

NOW PLAYING

OXM EXPLORES



Just New York? No offence, The Division, but your virus is pathetic. **Resident Evil's** epidemics have made the whole world a far sicker place. We wouldn't have it any other way **TOM STONE**

PUBLISHER CAPCOM / DEVELOPER CAPCOM / RELEASE DATE 1996-2016



American Midwest

Spencer Mansion, Resident Evil

Hardly the most globetrotting start to the series, but that's the point – the monsters trapping Chris Redfield in Spencer Mansion have him fearing he'll never see the outside world again. It's a location that could be anywhere, an everyman-sion. A true cautionary tale for the rich. Ish.



American Midwest

Arklay Mountains, Resident Evil Zero

A train journey is the perfect time to gaze upon that magnificent Arklay Mountain scenery. An opportunity missed by Billy and Rebecca, who are A) too busy fighting a giant scorpion, and B) exploring in the middle of the night, so they can't see squat anyway.



American Midwest

Raccoon City, Resident Evil 2

Claire Redfield, sister of Chris, arrives in this small city in search of her brother. Instead, she finds crashed cars, burning buildings and zombies chowing down on townsfolk. Introduces the series' running moral: never travel anywhere. Coming to a remake near you soon.



Unknown

Raccoon City, Resident Evil 3

"Hi there! You're through to the US government, how can we help? Raccoon City? N-never heard of it. You heard it got nuked as part of a government cover up? R-ridiculous! The government can't just make bad things disappear! Hmm? Whatever happened to that *Phantom Dust* remake?" *line goes dead*



New England

Tall Oaks, Resident Evil 6 "Hi! You're through to the US government. Sorry for the delay, we definitely weren't busy burying unsold copies of *The Fighter Within* in the New Mexico desert. Hmm? We destroyed Tall Oaks after another outbreak, you say? Er, congratulations! You've won a free one-way trip to Mexico!"



Just off the French coast

Rockfort Island, Resident Evil: Code

Veronica Claire is held captive here by Umbrella, only to be released after outbreak 8,678,439 of the T-virus. Devastatingly, there's actually no French spoken in the game, meaning we spent months learning the French for zombie (zombi) for nothing.



Paris

Umbrella Facility, Resident Evil: Code Veronica Claire Redfield takes a well-earned holiday to Paris. But instead of trying on berets and gawping at the Eiffel Tower, Claire attends an unofficial tour of a secret Umbrella facility. Typical workaholic behaviour, battling bioterrorists when she should be lazing on the beach pretending to enjoy *Eat, Pray, Love*. Tsk.



The Baltic Sea

Sushestvovanie Island, Resident Evil: Revelations 2 Rolls off the tongue. Formerly owned by the Soviet Union, Claire Redfield has to escape this island prison while fighting monsters and severe déjà vu, as this repeats the premise of *Code Veronica*. Draped in mystery, you won't find this island on any maps! Er, except this one.



Unspecified European mountain range

???, Resident Evil: Revelations Strictly classified this one, as Chris Redfield searches for a terrorist hideout in the chilly mountains. These terrorists, Veltro, are planning to infect the ocean with the T-abyss virus. What, from the mountains? They must have one hell of a throw.



China

Lanshiang, Resident Evil 6 Neon signs spark over market stalls and skyscrapers, their sickly glow lighting up the ever-evolving infected that Leon, Chris, Ada and seemingly every Resi character ever battle to save the city. Goes quite well, bar that missile full of C-virus which infects the entire city. Ah well. Thanks for trying anyway.

101



Western Africa

Kijuju, Resident Evil 5 Glorious sunshine? Check! Colourful, varied buildings? Check! Brainwashed ninja women? Er, hang on. Active volcanoes that are traversed by punching your way through boulders? Sorry, what? You lot went on the same 'research' trip as the *Resi 4* ignoramuses, didn't you?



Spain

The Village, Resident Evil 4 Expecting sun? Here the sky looks like it's thrown up after a gruel eating contest. Plus these villagers seem a century out of date even before the Las Plagas infection. Too busy crafting one of the best games ever to go on a research trip, devs? Cómo decepcionante...



RETROSPECTIVE **HALO: COMBAT** EVOLVED





How Bungie pioneered the modern console shooter – with a strategy game built for PC

ALEX DALE

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / DEVELOPER BUNGIE / FORMAT XBOX

Famously, *Halo: Combat Evolved* – the game that changed the landscape of first-person shooters on console forever – began life neither as a first-person shooter, nor on console. I do not consider this a coincidence.

But before we get into that, a brief history lesson. The world's first glimpse of what would eventually evolve to become the Halo we know and love occurred in 1999, a year before Microsoft's first Xbox console was even formally announced.

Revisiting the grainy VHS footage of its unveiling, it's surprising just how many of the Haloverse's iconic sights were established this early on in the life cycle. The trailer opens with a glimpse of the Master Chief's big orange mug. UNSC soldiers cram themselves into a Warthog's every last nook and cranny like clowns in a comedy car. As the trailer sweeps the other side of battlefield, we catch our first sighting of Elite soldiers brandishing Energy Swords. Classic, familiar scenes that are burned into our memories forever, and play out to the tune of something even more recognisable: *Halo's* booming orchestral score, practically unchanged note for note from the version we still hum today.

But for all the cosmetic similarities, under the skin *Halo* of '99 was a quite different beast to what it would ultimately become. In this stage of its life it was a third-person action game with real-time strategy elements, and one that was intended to see release not on a console, but Windows PC and the Apple Mac computer. (Which at this point in history, remember, was about as fashionable as a Christmas sweater, and not nearly as ironic).

I won't dwell too long on what happened next as it's all ancient history now. But to summarise, Microsoft swept in to purchase the Bungie studio from under Apple's nose (much to the ire of Steve Jobs),

and under MS's orders the project was whisked away from Mac/PC in order to be re-tooled into something capable of making an impact at the Xbox's launch. Somewhere during that process, presumably to make it punchier for the console crowd, the decision was made to transform *Halo* into a first-person shooter.

Gamepad evolved

That was a ballsy move, because the popular school of thought at the time was that the first-person shooter genre was a poor fit for consoles, whose bulky controllers couldn't hope to match the immediacy of mouse and keyboard interfaces. Oh, they existed on consoles in the years BC (Before Chief), all right, and a great many of them are considered classics, such as *GoldenEye*, *Perfect Dark* and *TimeSplitters*. But returning to these games today requires some serious mental rewiring before you are able to successfully look past their awkward, oblique control systems and often baffling level design.

But there's something ageless about *Halo: Combat Evolved*, like Jennifer Aniston, or that McDonald's Happy Meal that's been sitting in someone's cupboard for the last six years. Even today, nearly 15 years after its initial release, you can fire it up and it feels thoroughly slick and polished, with all the modern conventions and conveniences we've come to expect from today's first-person shooter titles.

You'd never guess that this was a title from 2001, and that goes doubly so if you're playing the 2011 *Anniversary* remaster, with its fancy HD visuals feeling more in sync with the flow of the action than the prehistoric original graphics. In a neat trick, you can swap between the two skins instantly by tapping the back button. Aside from some repetitive room design late in the game and some dodgy signposting (which is crudely but effectively fixed in the remaster by plastering arrows all over



ABOVE He removes that helmet at the end, but the camera obscures his mystery mush.

→ the floor), this function is your only true hint at the game's age.

Halo was less an evolutionary step in FPS design as it was an evolutionary elevator to the penthouse suite. How games generally tend to evolve is that a new title comes along with a new idea (for example, BioShock's audio logs, Call of Duty's perks, Assassin's Creed's mantling system), the entire world takes note, and before you know it, every other title that comes along afterwards pinches the idea and incorporates it into their own design. That is to say, gamemakers and fans alike tend to have preconceptions about how the various genres should work, and they persist until a better idea muscles them out. But don't feel bad, guys – pretty much everything else, from science to engineering, works along the same lines, too.

Xboxing clever

But in all my years I've never seen anything shake a genre up until it fizzes quite like *Halo: Combat Evolved*. Almost every modern first-person shooter feature first laid down roots here, and that's something I think can be attributed to its unusual development path. Since it didn't become a first-person game until quite late on in its development, Bungie didn't begin the project with any preconceptions about what an FPS could or could not be on a console. They built the world and the enemies and the weapons first, and then were forced to reverse-engineer it to work on Xbox. This led to some fresh approaches and some creative problem-solving, and the results continue to echo around the Xbox scene today.

I'm not sure how much credit Bungie can take for the control system – hindsight is 20/20 and all that – but it seems pretty intuitive



Perhaps the most influential is its strict weapon limit. Before Halo, it was fairly standard to have your entire fleet of guns at your disposal. Yet Halo limits you to just two guns at any one time, and if you want to change it up you have to source a replacement from the battleground. Likely, this was a solution to the fact that the Xbox controller doesn't have a row of function keys to hand; in practice it wedges in a whole new layer of strategy into the proceedings. Now, every selection is an agonising choice; do you carry two complementary weapons – maybe a sniper rifle and a shotgun – or do you double-down on short-range firepower? Should you keep a powerful cannon with two shells remaining, or ditch it for something much more modest, but with bundles of ammunition? Your decisions are compounded by the wonderful balance between the available arsenal and the foes you

“Combat Evolved was responsible for pioneering almost everything we know about FPS games today”

to me to use a dual-analogue stick set-up for separate movement and aiming, and I'm sure it would have become standard soon enough anyway. (Although I'll forever be a fan of the way it seamlessly introduces the control system within the game's fiction: it's dressed up as a calibration test for your suit's systems, and even finds the time to ask if you want to invert the controls). Other concessions to the game's new console home, however, are genius, and changed the course of our hobby forever.

ABOVE
Combat Evolved's
sci-fi setting
continues to
influence games
to this day.

face – even the bluntest of tools can prove capable of cutting through some tough obstacles. For example, the plasma pistol, seemingly the weediest weapon in the game, can effortlessly disable shields that deflect shotgun pellets like rain off an umbrella. There was no room for passengers here; every weapon had to justify its existence.

The two-weapon shtick proved such an elegant fix that it's now widely adopted across the genre, from blockbusters such as Call of Duty on downwards. Another Call of Duty feature that first saw the light of day in *Combat Evolved* was regenerating health. Was this a response to the loss of the PC's 'quicksave' feature? Halo apes this function by saving your progress at regular intervals, but without health regen, it would have run the risk of snookering the player by saving their process with but a slither of health remaining.

Like the gun limit, the energy shield is a small, functional change which has huge ramifications for the flow of the action. It implores you to scout around you in the middle of firefights, looking for small pockets of cover

shooting stars

The Xbox 1 (as in the first Xbox, not the Xbox One. Are you still with us?) was home to a wide spread of wannabe first-person contenders.



GORE BLIMEY DOOM 3
The FPS world had moved by the time *Doom 3* came around – its doorknob-dumb AI and cheap scares were old hat by 2005.



TOTAL DESTRUCTION BLACK
Criterion's first and only FPS is a short but sweet campaign with bone-rattling weapons and an eye for destruction.



MULTIPLAYER MAYHEM UNREAL CHAMPIONSHIP
One of the earliest Xbox Live-compatible titles, its breakneck combat kept us bouncing off the walls.



LEFT The Flood's crude 'rush and overwhelm' tactics were more in keeping with enemy behaviour trends of the era.

which you can retreat to and regroup if things get hairy. On higher difficulty settings, it becomes a game of chicken, as you poke your head above the parapet and test your shields' limits to breaking point before diving back behind cover. It led to the rise of a smarter, more aggressive breed of gunplay and it's little surprise that few games have seen fit to return to the health pack scavenger hunts of old.

Breath of fresh air

Halo's roots as a third-person strategy game also inadvertently dragged the FPS genre kicking and screaming into the outside world. In the years BC, when series such as Doom and Quake were the standard-bearers, the trend was to set levels in tight, claustrophobic corridors. *Halo: Combat Evolved* blew the walls wide open, with huge expansion levels such as The Silent Cartographer, offering the kind of freeform, tactical warfare that fans could only have dreamed about at the time. I would argue that Bungie never bettered the first half of the very first *Halo*; tellingly, the quality takes a nosedive in the second half when the action shifts from the outdoors to cramped alien ship interiors, and the guile of the Covenant forces gives way to the brutish numbers game of the Flood. As *Combat Evolved* thunders on, it seems to channel Doom and Quake more and more and is all the weaker for it.

All of which is to speak nothing of the part the Halo series played in



ABOVE The handy third-person vehicle view is a hangover from *Halo's* strategy origins.

popularising online multiplayer on console. In its original incarnation, of course, *Halo: Combat Evolved* couldn't be played online at all – it pre-dated the Xbox Live service, which didn't come along until a year later, in November 2002. Yet *Combat Evolved* played a vital part in whetting appetites for the service by opening up its multiplayer to local area networks – you could glue up to 16 Xboxes together with cable wire for a thrilling taste of things to come.

Halo: Combat Evolved was responsible for pioneering almost everything we know and cherish about first-person shooters today. From

the clever integration of vehicles and turrets to the use of save points, to recharging shields and the finely tuned weapon set, it all began life here. And the only reason it even came about in the first place was because Bungie were forced to swap genres halfway through and scramble to make things that were thought unworkable work. It makes me wonder if it's possible to repeat the trick to breathe new life into other stagnant genres. Hey, Activision, if you're reading this, is it too late to turn *Destiny 2* into an arcade racer? That's a genre that feels like it could use a fresh pair of eyes... **OXM**

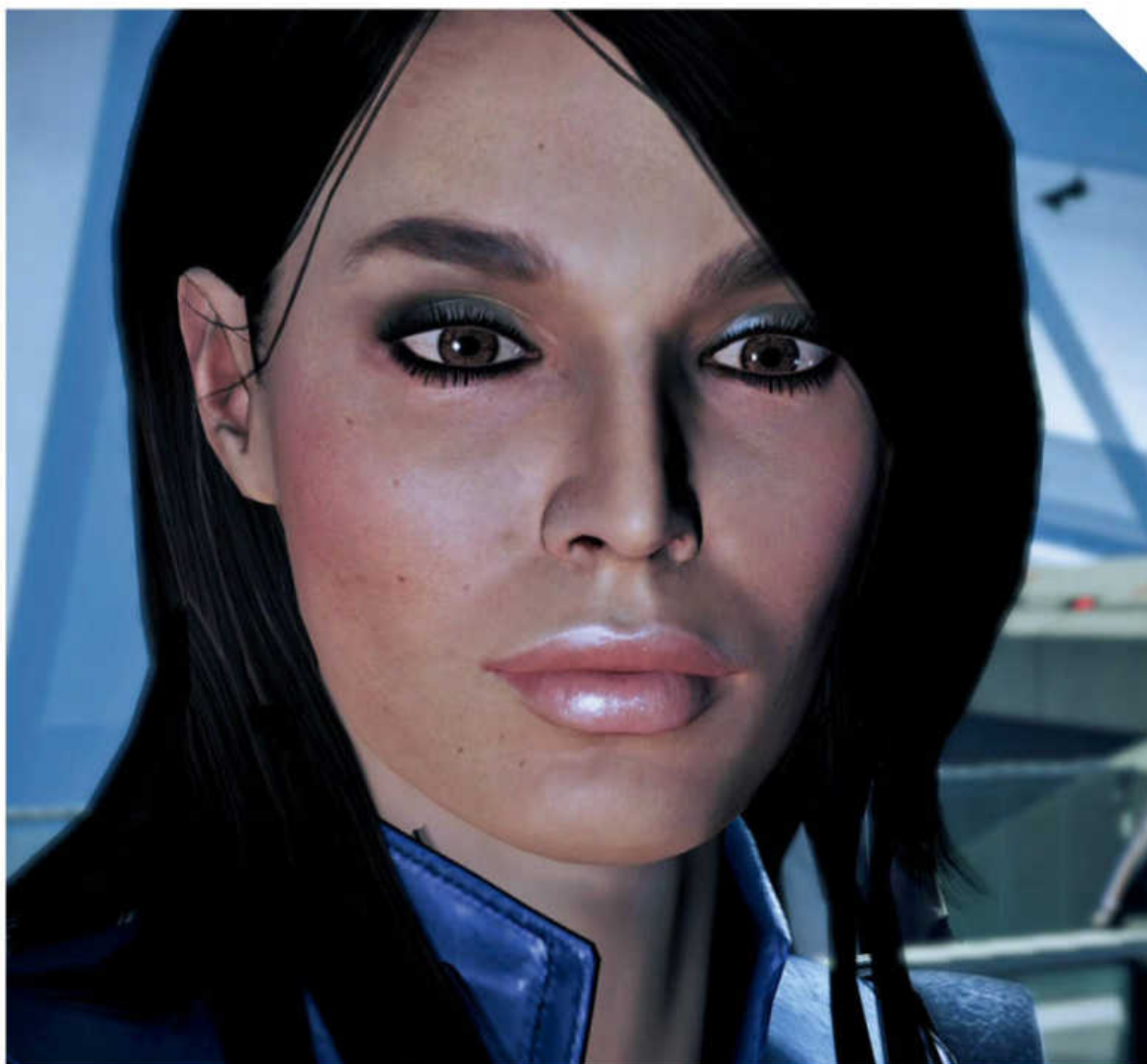
WHY I LOVE...

ASHLEY WILLIAMS



In praise – and defence – of the most contentious character in BioWare's sci-fi epic **CHRISTHURSTEN**

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS/EA / **DEVELOPER** BIOWARE / **FORMAT** XBOX 360



RIGHT Love her or hate her, Ash's ability to not skirt around controversial issues has to be admired.

M

ass Effect will be ten years old next year. I don't know about you, but I think I'd prefer to contend with civilisation-

consuming immortal robo-squid than confront the actual process of entropy that this last decade represents.

Even so, some things weather time better than others – and I'd argue that BioWare's sci-fi opus, even the rough-in-parts first game, is one of them.

This was an intelligent, dramatic and accessible marriage of the RPG and action game, taking what had worked about *Knights of the Old Republic* and retooling it with a larger audience in mind. Accessibility means more than shooting and conversation wheels, mind: 2007 also marks a strong first step towards better, more inclusive writing. That effort starts, for me, with Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams – among the first of Commander Shepard's companions, one of my favourite characters in the series, and the one most likely to have been left strapped to a nuke on Virmire about two-thirds of the way through the first game.

In order to explain why I like this character so much I'm going to have to address the krogan in the room: space racism. The notion that Ash Williams is a bigot whose views warrant her being sidelined – even sidelined to the point where you leave her to die in a nuclear explosion – is pretty widely held. 'Ash is a space racist' is something that somebody said once that has thrived in comments threads and forum discussions. It's snappy and easy to echo, if nothing else a fascinating example of how particular perspectives become dominant in fan communities through repetition – even when they're wrong. Which this time, they are.

This idea stems from one of the first 'off the record' conversations between Williams and Shepard in the first game. At this point in the series, 'can we trust aliens' is a recurring theme. A few human characters encourage ready cooperation, and a few encourage caution – Williams is in the latter camp, along with Navigator Pressly. Their argument is actually pretty sound: the turians went to war with humanity in living memory. The races of the Council often act primarily in

the best interest of their own species, rather than the whole. Shepard's enemy, Saren, is a turian specifically opposed to humanity, and at this point in the game – before the nature of the Reaper threat is known – it's believed that Saren's aims are political.

Misplaced trust

This is essentially what Ash says in that early conversation: the Normandy is a top-secret ship on a top-secret mission, and humanity is sharing it with people whose objectives we don't fully understand. She uses the example of a dog-walker encountering a dangerous bear in the woods and abandoning their beloved dog to save their own lives. I've seen people interpret this as 'Ash compares aliens to animals', but this is completely incorrect: in this analogy the Council is represented by the dog-walker, and humanity is the dog. She worries that we're at risk of being left in the firing line by aliens that will ultimately

Ash is different. She arrives fully formed with a history and a set of values. She has a positive relationship with her family and with faith – and not Space Faith, either, but actual terrestrial real-world faith. She's believable as a person: she tells jokes that aren't always funny and says things that aren't always appropriate. There's the sense that she could have been the protagonist. She's the one who lost her entire unit after Saren's attack on Eden Prime, after all, and it's Ash that goes back to the Alliance to continue their work after Shepard's temporary 'death' at the hands of the Collectors.

I sometimes wonder if Ash's unpopularity stems from the fact that she isn't there for the player to 'fix'. This is the pattern elsewhere, most notably in the second game – out of a dozen companions, only a handful of them *don't* require you to step in to resolve their daddy issues. Ash's own backstory revolves around the

"I wonder if Ash's unpopularity stems from the fact she isn't there for the player to fix"

prioritise protecting their own people – and she's right, as it turns out.

Late in the game, if you bring her to a pro-humanity demonstration on the Citadel, she'll aggressively oppose its leader's views – time on the Normandy has changed her mind. She forms friendships with Garrus, Tali and Wrex. In the second and third game, she no longer has this attitude. Even so, that one conversation in the first game has left an indelible mark on the character.

I find this situation fascinating because Ash's value to the series comes specifically from the fact that she's willing to voice challenging views. In the RPG genre, there is a tendency for companion characters to be written for the player's benefit. They're secondary characters in their own lives, and if they disagree with you then it's likely that your job is to either prove them wrong or ultimately kill them (Wrex, for example.)

way that she's been sidelined in the military because of the actions of her grandfather, but she's already overcome most of those obstacles by the time you meet her. And after Shepard goes rogue in the second game, she quickly steps in to ask if you know what the hell you're doing. It's not until mid-way through *Mass Effect 3* that the two resolve their differences, and that's if they don't shoot each other first.

I'd love to see more writing like this. Companion characters are at their best when they're written like real people, and real people don't exist for the benefit of a protagonist. Ten years on, the industry as a whole has made stop-start progress in this regard – and it's more obvious than ever that *Mass Effect* was ahead of its time.

Next time: conquering *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, one Gwent hand at a time

BELOW The vastness of the universe only strengthens Ash's religious beliefs that there's something more out there.



→ WHAT GAMES DO YOU LOVE? SEND YOUR LUSTY THOUGHTS TO OXM@FUTURENET.COM

5 GREATEST COMIC BOOK TIE-INS IN XBOX HISTORY

Whether Spidey gets your senses tingling or Batman is your dark knight in shining armour, here's our list of gaming's greatest LOUISE BLAIN

01

SPIDER-MAN 2

If it wasn't for Rocksteady's Bat adventures, *Spidey 2*'s movie adaptation might just be the best open world superhero game ever. Why is Treyarch's webbed tie-in so successful? One word: swinging. The web-slinger's arachnid abilities are mapped to both shoulder triggers and once you get into the rhythm of grabbing and letting go, the huge, seamless New York is an irresistible playground of soaring and stomach-droppingly responsive acrobatics. Add in combat that sees Spidey hanging goons off street lamps, a slew of side missions, and even a citizen that shouts "hey, webhead!" on your way past and this is a true classic. Yep, you can print that in The Daily Bugle.



02

TRANSFORMERS: DEVASTATION

Michael Bay is responsible for an awful lot of therapy bills for what he's done to '80s stalwarts the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Transformers in movie form. But all's not lost. If anyone could fix the terror Bay has wrought, it's *Bayonetta* and *Metal Gear Rising* devs Platinum Games. Their *Devastation* is a nostalgia shot in the arm with dizzyingly bright, fast-paced action that looks like it was lifted directly from the '80s cartoon. Add in the studio's signature combo-based combat and real-life surviving original voice actors Peter Cullen and Dan Gilvezan and it's eye-wateringly good fun.

03

LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES

It doesn't matter who your favourite character is, TT Games' first bricked jaunt into Marvel territory has them all. There's plenty of the 'destroy this, build that' mentality of the Lego franchise, but it's so beautifully aligned with heroes' abilities that it feels as fresh as a daisy sprouting from one of Groot's organic crannies. While the campaign across the galaxy is fun, it's discovering the secrets of the huge open world New York that holds the most delights as you hurtle skyward with Iron Man or relentlessly mow down crims as the Punisher. And yes, there are more in-jokes than an episode of *Arrested Development*.



04

X-MEN LEGENDS

It's rare that a game manages to pay homage to decades of source material, but Raven Software's mutant-flavoured Xbox offering gets it just right with an action RPG that has more than a hint of dungeon crawling. The team-based gameplay lets you switch between Wolverine and 14 of his X-pals at will, and while the *Ultimate X-Men* comics inspired the majority of the costumes, the rest of the lore is taken from across the mutant universe. There's also the small matter of a classic story penned by a group of former Marvel writers. Smash in juicy combat and the beautiful cel-shaded visuals, and this is as solid as Adamantium.



05

BATMAN ARKHAM TRILOGY

We've included all three here because choosing between them is a bit like deciding what to watch on Netflix when someone says "I don't mind". Whether your favourite is the more linear *Asylum*, which dropped our jaws back in 2009 as the Scarecrow tinkered effortlessly with the fourth wall; *City*, where the dark open world makes you feel truly like the Bat himself; or *Knight*, where all of Gotham waits to be ground to dust by Batmobile tyres, this caped trilogy is a comic book masterpiece. Toss in Rocksteady's ultra crunchy combat and exceptional voice performances and this is like a Batarang followed by a fist to the face of lesser tie-ins.

06

THE WOLF AMONG US

Are you sitting comfortably? Then we shall begin. Bill Willingham's fairy tale-packed *Fables* graphic novel series makes a perfect translation from panel to screen with the detective adventures of Bigby Wolf. In the heart of Manhattan lies Fabletown, where the whisky is always neat and Snow White and co must blend in with regular humans. Not only easy on the eyes with its comic book visuals, there's a rollicking murder plot and characters that'll genuinely warm the coldest of hearts. Hell, the opening neon-flecked credits are worth the admission alone. Further proof that there's no one better than Telltale to take on an episodic Batman series later this year.

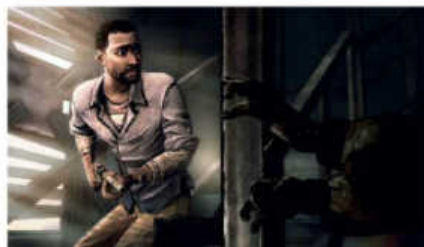
07 **INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US**

NetherRealm's heroic brawler did Bats vs Supes with eye-popping visuals long before Zack Snyder stunk up the joint. Pitting DC welterweight against DC welterweight is a ridiculous amount of fun and there's a juicy alternate reality plotline with a catastrophically murderous Joker that means everyone's at each other's throats. Each of the 24-strong line up, including Wonder Woman, The Flash and Harley Quinn, have their own unique traits, combat is satisfyingly crunchy, and environments have interactive elements that let you throw water-towers, neon signs and even the Bat signal. Commissioner Gordon is going to be pissed.

08

SCOTT PILGRIM VS THE WORLD: THE GAME

Another comic tie-in that just shouldn't work, Mr Pilgrim's adventures to defeat Ramona Flowers' seven evil exes is a gloriously happy-making side-scrolling beat 'em up from Ubisoft Montreal. While the nostalgic 16-bit visuals, couch co-op and clear love for all things retro are brilliant fun, the main draw is the spectacular soundtrack from permanently upbeat chiptune masters Anamanaguchi. Get to Spotify and if it doesn't make you want to snort dust from a NES cartridge, take on a series of beautiful nostalgic environments and put your pixelated fists in faces then you might be a bit broken. Sorry. Insert coin to try again?

09 **THE WALKING DEAD SEASON ONE**

There's no shortage of undead apocalypses on Xbox, but none are as heart wrenching and downright grim as this. Bringing the sheer desperation of Robert Kirkman's zombie-infested nightmare to consoles, this is instantly gripping as you meet Lee, Clem and a ragtag bundle of survivors you'll become far more attached to than you'd like. Without a single easy choice across the whole game, it's a good thing that each of the five episodes is only a couple of hours long. The stress, quite frankly, is enough to enforce a prescription of *Adventure Time* to help you recover.

10

ULTIMATE MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3

Okay, so it's only *half* a comic book tie-in (sue us) but seriously, who doesn't want to see what happens when you pit Resident Evil's Nemesis against Iron Man? Still focusing on a tag team of three heroes or villains, this update to the third in the series adds in new characters such as Doctor Strange, Hawkeye and Rocket Raccoon to make sure you can build an even better Guardians of the Galaxy or Avengers roster. S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Helicarrier is a stage, Dark Daredevil makes an appearance and you can chomp through arcade mode as the devourer of worlds himself, Galactus. Who needs twenty more years of the MCU again?



11

THE DARKNESS 2

Mafia hitman? A hit with the ladies? The powers of an elemental demon force that mean living tentacles with teeth sprout out of his back? What's *not* to love about Jackie Estacado? While the original *Darkness* – based on the comic book series by Marc Silvestri, Garth Ennis and David Wohl – was a demonic whale of a time, it's the second first-person gorefest that takes the biscuit. If by biscuit you mean removing spines rectally, slicing foes in half with tentacles, popping heads off enemies like corks from stoppers, and yanking beating hearts out through mouths. And if that is what you mean by biscuit, we ain't ever having you round for tea.



12

THE PUNISHER

Everyone remembers *Manhunt 2*'s ratings controversy, but Frank Castle's comic adaptation had an equally rough ride with the BBFC. It was one of the only games slapped with an Adults Only rating in the US, and in the UK it was rejected entirely until additional solarising and zoom effects were added for the 'special interrogation' sequences. Totally in keeping with the comic's brutal atmosphere and Castle's unrelenting quest for his brand of justice, these include crushing heads by closing windows, drilling eyeballs and, oh yeah, electrocuting enemies with eels in a tank. Please don't try this at home.

13

DEADPOOL

While *Deadpool* as a whole is far more hit and miss than the Merc with a Mouth would ever be, its high concept 'the anti hero forces the developers to make his game' angle is enough to grant it entry into this list. The fourth wall may as well not exist here as a Nolan North-voiced Deadpool smashes it to pieces repeatedly by using speech bubbles as platforms, noticing when Achievements pop, and even making calls to his own voice actor. As tie-ins go, it's undoubtedly the weakest of this bunch, but the love of the character is there, and if you're a fan, there are worse ways to while away the hours waiting for Ryan Reynolds' cinematic sequel.



14

THE INCREDIBLE HULK: ULTIMATE DESTRUCTION

It might not be easy being green but this open world smashfest makes it easy to feel like the seriously angry model for purple board shorts. A more destructible and insane version of *Spider-Man 2*, everything in Hulk's world can be destroyed. Buses can be surfed, aircraft swatted out of the sky like flies and cars tossed through the air to hit missiles. If you can see it, you can do a Miley Cyrus and come in like a green wrecking ball. You might start to see Iron Man's point when it comes to the Superhero Registration Act in *Civil War*, but no game has better nailed the utterly destructive feel of Bruce Banner's monster since.



15

MARVEL: ULTIMATE ALLIANCE

Put *X-Men Legends* on Marvel amphetamines and you get *Ultimate Alliance*. Another top-down brawler from Raven Software, this hands over a slew of heroes for you to take on the nefarious Doctor Doom. Sure, it's just a load more button mashing to take on a stack of goons before fighting a mega boss, but the customisation on offer is huge and creating your very own super team has never been this much fun. Once again you can hop, skip and jump across the Marvel universe, and if you want to team Spidey up with the Avengers before *Civil War* this year, he's just a menu selection away. Bet the film studio lawyers wished it were that easy.



Games, hardware, movies and TV – everything you need for the ultimate Xbox One experience

THE TEN BEST XBOX ONE GAMES

games

01

METAL GEAR SOLID V

PUBLISHER KONAMI

After the barney storytelling excess of *MGS IV*, Kojima signs off with the most *game-y* entry in his celebrated stealth-action series yet.

DEFINING MOMENT Scooping a stray puppy from the Afghan sands and nurturing him into a killer.



02

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR

Brutal and beautiful in equal measures, *GTA V* is so rich in size, scope and spectacle it's hard to believe it was originally built for Xbox 360.

DEFINING MOMENT Warping into the skin of Trevor – only to find he's drunk-driving a helicopter.



03

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO

This brilliantly authentic world of brutal death and primal lust makes efforts from RPG rivals look wooden in comparison.

DEFINING MOMENT Finding out the truth behind Crookback Bog's murky past – and rewriting its future.



04

HALO 5: GUARDIANS

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT

It's *Halo* back to its brilliant, belligerent best – with dash and hover techniques keeping the King of Deathmatches a step ahead of the online competition.

DEFINING MOMENT Overcoming daunting numerical odds to win the round for your fallen team-mates in Breakout.



05

ALIEN: ISOLATION

PUBLISHER SEGA

In which you're trapped aboard a spaceship with a lethal nemesis. The tension's so thick you can cut through it with a blowtorch.

DEFINING MOMENT Covering behind a rickety hospital trolley, with *everything* crossed that she doesn't sniff you out.



06

FALLOUT 4

PUBLISHER BETHESDA

An epic, near-endless RPG that throws together thrilling gunplay, a deep crafting system, and a vast retro-futuristic wasteland with the kind of force usually reserved for nuclear fusion.

DEFINING MOMENT Claiming your first Deathclaw scalp.



07

ORI & THE BLIND FOREST

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT

Impossibly lavish 2D adventure that soothes your soul with pastel hues and harmonic melodies, before ripping it out with vicious platforming sections.

DEFINING MOMENT Finally nailing the screamingly tough Ginso Tree segment.



08

RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

PUBLISHER UBISOFT

Tense, cerebral shooter that's more fun when nothing's happening than many other online shooters are at the height of their bombastic fireworks.

DEFINING MOMENT Hunkering down next to your hostage as the other team blowtorch through the steel. And then...



09

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

PUBLISHER WARNER BROS

A technical and cinematic masterpiece that hints at the splendour of new-gen open world games to come.

DEFINING MOMENT Leaping off Wayne Tower and performing a dramatic swoop-over of Gotham's iconic bridges.



10

ROCKET LEAGUE

PUBLISHER PSYONIX

Cars? Playing football? That's mad.

Mad, but 100% correct. One of the most original and addictive multiplayer games we've seen in a long, long time.

DEFINING MOMENT Whether it's scored with your bumper or your exhaust, every explosive goal is one to cherish.



→ READ THE FULL XBOX ONE REVIEWS AT GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM

BEST GADGETS FOR XBOX ONE

accessories

01 HALO 5: GUARDIANS MASTER CHIEF CONTROLLER



This UNSC-approved pad can't match the pricier Elite Controller for features and sheer class but with its golden D-pad, it makes up for it by being one of the more beautiful Xbox controllers we've seen.

02 ELGATO GAME CAPTURE HD60



"Xbox, record that. DAMMIT, XBOX, I CLEARLY COMMANDED YOU TO RECORD THAT." Save your throat (and prepare to launch your YouTube career) with this excellent capture device. It can record footage retroactively, even if you stupidly forget to press record.

03 TURTLE BEACH EAR FORCE XO SEVEN PRO



This headset's fancy 'Superhuman Hearing' boosts quieter audio cues in games – like the footsteps of foes – to make it easier to find other players in tense online battles. Perfect for getting an advantage in games like *Rainbow Six Siege*.

04 2TB XBOX GAME DRIVE BY SEAGATE



With *Halo 5: Guardians* growing bigger every month (it's the Flood of downloads), 500GB of hard drive space is feeling ever smaller. Quadruple your storage with this 2TB external hard drive. No more deleting your indie collection every time you update.

05 VENOM TWIN DOCKING STATION



Inviting a friend over for local multiplayer can often descend into fist fights for the one controller with any juice in it. Keep your fighting in-game with this docking station, which can charge two controllers at once. You'll save a fortune in batteries, too.

06 CSL STEERING WHEEL P1, CLUBSPORT WHEEL BASE V2 SERVO AND CSR PEDALS



This isn't cheap, but it responds like an actual steering wheel, immersing you in virtual races like no controller ever could. Worth it to experience *Forza 6* at full pelt.

ENTERTAINMENT PICKS FOR MAY

movies & tv

01 STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS

PRICE £13.99 (MOVIES & TV)



So this is what happens when you give *Star Wars* to a director with an eye for action and an ear for dialogue. The new cast dazzle, old hands make us fall in love all over again and memories of the prequels are blown away.

02 BRIDGE OF SPIES

PRICE £9.99 (MOVIES & TV)



Spielberg's ace thriller sees Tom Hanks channel Jimmy Stewart as a lawyer drawn into murky spycraft by a brilliant (and Oscar-winning) Mark Rylance. It's almost a Cold War counterpart to *Saving Private Ryan*, dropping the gore for nervous sweat.

03 VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN

PRICE £9.99 (MOVIES & TV)



Want to see Professor X suck pus out of a hunchback Harry Potter? This burst of gross body horror is the one redeeming scene in James McAvoy and Daniel Radcliffe's Shelley reboot. Horribly overacted, this revival feels as dead as the pre-lightning Monster.

04 BLACK MASS

PRICE £13.99 (MOVIES & TV)



Johnny Depp's love of prosthetics and wigs means he never quite looks human as mobster James 'Whitey' Bulger, but the fake body parts melt away in the heat of his murderous turn as he massacres his way through the Boston underworld. A treat.

05 HEROES REBORN

PRICE £16.99 (MOVIES & TV)



Heroes' reboot is more of a remix. It has the same eye for memorable characters and slick production values, but has failed to solve the show's plotting and plausibility issues. Fun enough, but don't expect many answers – season two just got canned.

06 OUTLANDER SEASON 2

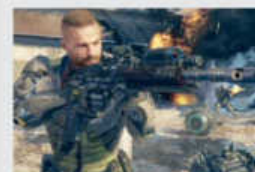
PRICE SUBSCRIPTION (AMAZON PRIME)



Outlander looks like a quaint Highland fling on the surface (a woman travels through time to 18th century Scotland), but it's home to sex and violence that even *Game of Thrones* would balk at. If you can stomach the tonal shifts, it's a great show.

BUBBLING UNDER: WAR ACTION

QUALITY FIRST-PERSON WARFARE ON XBOX ONE



CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS III

Wall running! Zombie campaign! Jeff Goldblum! This bleak, bewildering vision of 2065 warfare is the craziest *Call* of all – and that's saying something!



BATTLEFIELD 4

Frequent updates and a strong community to help fill out vast 64-player maps mean that even three years after release, this is still the Xbox One multiplayer war shooter of choice.



CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE

A strong, varied campaign, fun future gadgets and Kevin Spacey chewing the scenery so much he's a bigger threat to buildings than your weapons.



WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

An *Inglorious Basterds*-esque blast through an alternate '60s where the Nazis won WWII. Come for the OTT shooting, stay for the fascist Beatles records.

the disc slot

They make the games we love, but what do they play for fun? We ask developers to pick six from Xbox history. This month: **Randy Varne11**



Randy Varne11
Creative Director
at Gearbox

Varne11's new game, *Battleborn*, is a MOBA/FPS/brawler/team shooter with 25 playable characters and co-op/versus multiplayer both online and off. Basically, a nightmare to sum up in 40 words or less.

[1]



Certainly **Minecraft** [1]. I love building sims and sandboxes and that one just keeps on giving. It's brilliant. I also love **XCOM** [2]. *XCOM 2* isn't out on consoles [*thanks for reminding us – Ed.*] but I've always loved the tactical strategy. Next, I've got to say **Borderlands** [3]. It's funny, when *Borderlands* launched I had about 120 hours in the game and I now have 360 hours! Oh my gosh, I also absolutely love stunt games! One of my favourites that I would love to keep around is **Sunset Overdrive** [4]. It was such an awesome game. It's kind of a weird fringe choice, but *Overdrive* took what the early Tony Hawk games gave to me – that compulsion to complete challenges, to really want to get that down. In that same kind of spirit I love big RPGs, though I'm more of a fantasy guy than a sci-fi guy so if I have to choose between them... **The Witcher 3** [5] or **Fallout 4** [6]... I'm going to have to take them together. But both of those games have been fantastic for me as we've wrapped up *Battleborn* and I've gotten some more time to get into other games. I love both of them. Big open worlds. I started this list with *Minecraft* and I want to end it with those two because they're much more tailored experiences. Great storytelling, but still a lot of agency in my hands as a player to have whatever adventure I want.

[2]



[3]



[4]



[5]



[6]



→ TEAM OXM REV THEIR CHAINSAW BAYONETS TO CARVE TOWARDS THE 3 JUNE ISSUE

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OUT 27TH MAY FOR XBOX ONE

'TROPICO 5 IS A CITY BUILDER
WORTH GETTING EXCITED ABOUT'
- IGN

'FLIES IN THE FACE
OF OTHER STRATEGY GAMES'
- GAMESPOT

'SEEMS SET TO BE AS DELIGHTFULLY
CORRUPT AS EVER'
- PC GAMER

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